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ABSTRACT

The Achievement Gap is the single most critical issue in Illinois education. This study graphically illustrates the difference in academic performance between low-income children and their peers, between minority children and their classmates, and between those schools that serve a majority of children from low-income families and those that serve a more advantaged population. Using a framework of a decade of research from sociologists, educators and economists, the paper develops hypotheses for studying the Golden Spike schools, 59 schools in 44 school districts that have an established record of closing the Achievement Gap. The quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that the Golden Spike schools have distinct commonalities in leadership, literacy, personnel, community engagement, and other characteristics. The study closes with policy recommendations and critical considerations for state level policy makers that will make possible the replication of successful programs, practices, and services of the Golden Spike schools. (Contains 1 map, 15 figures, and 44 references.) (Author/SLD)

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# CLOSING ILLINOIS' ACHIEVEMENT GAP:

# LESSONS FROM THE "GOLDEN SPIKE" HIGH POVERTY HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS

by

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## Abstract

The Achievement Gap is the single most critical issue in Illinois education. This study graphically illustrates the difference in academic performance between low-income children and their peers, between minority children and their classmates and between those schools that serve a majority of children from low-income children families and those that serve a more advantaged population. Using a framework of a decade of research from sociologists, educators and economists, the author develops hypotheses for studying the Golden Spike schools—schools that have an established record of closing the Achievement Gap. The quantitative and qualitative analysis indicate that the Golden Spike Schools have distinct commonalities in leadership, literacy, personnel, community engagement and other characteristics. The study closes with policy recommendations and critical considerations for state level policy makers that will make possible the replication of successful programs, practices and services of the Golden Spike schools.

*When I Turn 50*

*When I'm 50 I will be married and I will have two kids and I will make it a point not to be like other men I know. I will help my wife raise my kids and I will be a good Daddy. I will get myself a good job and buy my kids everything that they need. I am going to work at a store and be the manager. I am going to be very nice to people and help people who need help. I am only going to be married once. I am going to have a nice life.*

- "Victor" R., Grade Four

Victor's chances of realizing his dreams are slim. He is now in fifth grade, and at his elementary school only 15% of his classmates met fifth grade reading standards on the state assessment. Just 10% of them met state mathematics standards. At his neighborhood high school, 17% of the students met state reading standards, 7% mathematics standards, 4% writing standards, and 3% met state science standards. In 2001 the composite ACT score of all high school juniors in Illinois was 19.4, a full 5.8 points above Victor's future high school. In fact, the graduation rate at that high school is 62%. If Victor is one of the students to graduate, chances are he will not have the skills necessary to pursue further education successfully, much less manage a business. His future income will most likely be far less than he needs for the "nice life" he envisions.

Less than 30 miles away, Valerie attends an elementary school housing the same number of students, but at her school 97% of her fifth grade classmates met reading standards and 96% met math standards. Eleventh grade students in Valerie's neighborhood high school—which is about three times the size of Victor's-- had an average ACT score of 24.3, and 87% of the students met state standards in reading, and 89% in mathematics. 84% met state standards in writing and 89% in science. The graduation rate is 98%. By attending these schools, Valerie is well along the way to "having a nice life."

As Victor graduates from fifth grade and looks toward 50, the next six years of schooling present an almost impassable chasm, while Valerie's next six years are a bridge to attaining her dreams (see Table 1). That is not to say that Victor will not succeed, but he will have to have extraordinary fortitude, unimaginable resolve, and a healthy dose of faith and good fortune. He will certainly need better schooling and more opportunities in school than he has now. Without additional intervention from the educational system, without some sweeping changes in the functioning of his schools and without a community support network, Victor is far more likely to end up like one of those "other men he knows."

**TABLE ONE**
**A Tale of Two Systems**

| Measures | Victor's Schools | Valerie's Schools |
|---|---|---|
| | J. W. Johnson Elementary | Monroe Elementary |
| Enrollment | 469 | 478 |
| Grade 3 class size | 15.3 | 21.5 |
| % meeting/exceeding on ISAT | | |
| Grade 5 Reading | 15 | 97 |
| Grade 5 Writing | 12 | 98 |
| Grade 5 Mathematics | 10 | 96 |
| % low-income students | 100 | 0 |
| | Manley HS | Hinsdale Central HS |
| Enrollment | 650 | 2321 |
| Graduation Rate | 62% | 98% |
| % meeting/exceeding PSAE | | |
| Grade 11 Reading | 17 | 87 |
| Grade 11 Writing | 4 | 84 |
| Grade 11 Mathematics | 7 | 89 |
| Grade 11 Science | 3 | 86 |
| Grade 11 Social Studies | 6 | 89 |
| Average ACT Composite | 13.6 | 24.3 |
| % low-income students | 99 | 13 |

Victor and Valerie are real children. One cannot help but wonder how elementary schools so close together and so similar in enrollment can have such enormous disparities in achievement. How can their neighborhood high schools differ so greatly in graduation rate? What can explain the fact that by the time the students in these two elementary schools get to fifth grade that their future education and career options are pretty much predetermined? How can 10% of ten-year-old children in one neighborhood meet mathematics standards while 96% meet them in another neighborhood?

The answer is poverty. At Victor's school, 100% of the students are from low-income families, while at Valerie's school, 100% are from middle and upper class families. Poverty creates quite different life experiences for these two children as described in these excerpts from Illinois communities:

> *"Soil samples tested at residential sites turn up disturbing quantities of arsenic, mercury and lead. Five of the children in one building have been poisoned. Although children rarely die of poisoning by lead, its effects are insidious ... by the time it becomes apparent, it is "too late to undo the permanent brain damage ...*

*Bleeding gums, impacted teeth and rotting teeth are routine matters for children ...who live for months with pain that grown-ups would find unendurable ... pain that saps their energy and aspiration ...*

*Smokey (age 9) says his sister was raped and murdered and then dumped behind his school. Other children add more details: she was eleven years old. She was beaten with a brick until she died. The murder was committed by a man who knew their mother."* (Kozol, 1992)

*School is a refuge from daily pressures of life in their neighborhoods. MD shares a cramped basement apartment with his mother ... It's across from an all night convenience store where he must walk past "gangsters and predators" to get to the ice cream section. The scene spills over to his doorstep some nights."* (Quintanilla, 2002)

The difference between Victor's and Valerie's schools begins to tell the story of the "achievement gap." This "gap" is the difference between the learning, i.e. "achievement," of poor students and their peers, between children of color and their peers, and between schools with a high percentage of low-income families and their peers. In Illinois, it is a gap that exists statewide at third grade where 40% of students from low-income families meet state standards compared to 75% of their peers. It is a gap which persists to the extent that in grade eleven a mere 20% of low-income students meet high school mathematics standards compared to 65% of their classmates from middle and high income families.

Victor and Valerie are real children in real schools. They have never heard of an "achievement gap," yet they are living it. Though they do not realize it, this gap matters a lot to them. It tilts the "playing field" precipitously, creating far different opportunities for success in school, for completing school, for succeeding in further education after high school, for leading a productive life and for making choices. It affects many, many students. In Illinois, approximately 500,000 children are being educated in about 920 schools that draw at least half of their enrollment from low-income families.

Despite this bleak "big picture," there are many success stories in Illinois. We have ample evidence of thousands of poor, minority students who excel. They have top scores, their attendance is perfect, and they graduate from Illinois public schools and continue to excel. At the school level, there are schools with a high percentage of low-income students and high percentages of minority children who have excellent records of achievement. The large majority of their students meets or exceeds state standards, parent involvement is high and they improve from one year to the next. They are schools that have overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to assure that each and every child will have the opportunity to succeed in school, to realize his or her dreams and to become a productive, responsible citizen. They are schools that show the achievement gap can be defeated and the term relegated to the junk pile of educational jargon. They

are schools with a story worth telling and worth replicating. ***These "Golden Spike" schools of high poverty and high performance have inspirational and remarkable stories of extraordinary effort and unparalleled teamwork—not unlike those of the individuals who closed the gap with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. They are schools from which policy makers must learn and then must act to make sweeping changes necessary to effect positive changes for poor children.***

This paper examines these successful schools. It illustrates the expanse of this gap, but unlike previous studies, it also provides a glimpse of schools that have closed the gap. There are not many, but their stories are important. During the last three years, only fifty-nine high performing, high poverty Golden Spike schools in forty-four districts across the entire state (see list of schools and accompanying map on pages 69 and 70) that have been successful in bridging the gap. This study attempts to go beyond the numbers to look at these schools that have established and sustained a record of success. This is not an abstract, theoretical study of demographics and numerical profiles. It is about the people behind the numbers and what they are doing to close the achievement gap. Using data obtained by surveys conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) as well as observations and interview described below, the researcher identifies commonalities and then uses them to recommend policy and budget allocation decisions at the local and state level. In short, this study attempts to answer the challenge Grover Whitehurst (2001) posed at a White House summit: "Whatever these schools are doing to perform so well, and we need to understand that better than we do now … there is a main effect, something going on in the school as a whole that affects the practice of all teachers in the school and raises student achievement accordingly."

## An Appalling Achievement Gap

In the 1860s, President Lincoln envisioned the construction of a transcontinental railroad connecting the east and west. A knowledgeable railroad attorney and a visionary leader, Lincoln understood that the future of America depended on this link to drive commerce and migration. Lincoln also envisioned an equal and just society. He understood the power and importance of education. On one hand, the work on the railroad begun in his administration succeeded beyond what even he could have imagined as the gap was closed four years after his death. On the other hand, education in his home state remains an unfulfilled promise for most poor and minority children.

The achievement gap begins before children enter school and is compounded in the first two to three years of formal education. Children coming to the kindergarten door with what Whitehurst (2001) calls a "linguistically disadvantaged" background and children receiving inadequate literacy instruction are the major causes for failure in reading. The problem is exacerbated in the early grades, as children of poverty have far different literacy experiences at home and in the community—such as access to book (Neumann, 2001)--and arguably a far different education than their peers from more well to do families. As a result of the lack of early learning experiences, in Illinois only 40% of all poor students met third grade reading standards compared to 75% of their peers (figure one). ***Given that the ability to read at third grade level is a strong predictor of academic success, one can reasonably infer that more than half of the approximately 800,000 students from low-income families in our public schools have not been educated well enough to meet state standards.*** As a result, nearly 500,000 Illinois children face "lifetime consequences of limited opportunities in higher education, employment, and earnings." (Pollock, 2001) Before turning to other compelling figures, one should understand the brief history of the achievement gap.

Nationwide, the achievement gap began to attract attention with early studies in the late sixties and early seventies. The Coleman (1966) report, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (Jencks et al, 1972) and a large body of related research showed that the educational outcomes of poor, minority students lagged their peers. The gap became the object of intense study during the 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on outcomes of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, but it fell off during the 90s. Notes, Lee (2002):

> *Only passing concerns have been raised about the growing racial and ethnic achievement gaps during the 1990s and those have been accompanied by a few empirical studies ... Moreover, those studies have concentrated on a variety of social factors such as socioeconomic and family conditions. Most studies have concentrated on these factors or attempted to address variables that could not be easily changed such as class size, school size, etc. Thus far researchers have been more effective at identifying a plethora of causes than recommending programs and policies to close the gap.*

As a result, achievement gaps have remained, and in some states have increased. With few exceptions, notably in North Carolina, large scale efforts to close the gap have been ineffective at best, and absent at worst.

Recently, interest has been rekindled as the achievement gap has literally made headline news in many states including New York (Simon, 2002; Hartocollis, 2002), Ohio (Fields, 2002), Connecticut (*Hartford Courant*, 2002), etc. Moreover, based on the "Texas miracle" and success of North Carolina in closing the gap the past decade, the Bush administration has made bridging it a central piece of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the administration's educational reform plan. Administrators in some districts, which were successful in closing the gap, for example, Brazosport Texas and Pinellas County, Florida, launched lucrative consulting businesses and obtained some lofty fees for telling their story. These districts and others far less well known have discovered that sustained efforts can make a difference. The facts that NCLB gives districts twelve years to improve the achievement of all groups and that annual yearly progress of school districts must be tied to the achievement of all students have delivered a strong message to states and local districts to address this problem immediately. Despite the President's vision and the enactment of NCLB, educational policies, practices and funding—and by extension closing the achievement gap-remain the responsibility of states and local school boards.

In Illinois, the achievement gap has solidified in part because of benign neglect. In the late 1980's, it mattered a great deal to policy makers. In fact, study of the achievement gap resulted in the publication of a joint report by the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois State Board of Education, "Our Future at Risk" (1988). Governor Thompson commissioned this work based on the premise that "minority achievement affects everyone." The joint boards examined the problems of lagging achievement and completion of educational programs. Their report concluded with several recommendations including its first: "***Make minority student achievement a priority in Illinois***." (Joint Committee, 1988) Sadly, most of the bold recommendations were not enacted and even the data lay dormant for a decade.

With the advent of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (the ISAT) in 1999, the State Board of Education looked anew at the achievement gap. Not surprisingly, the gap had not disappeared. In fact, in the land of Lincoln, the results should have been an embarrassment for public education—African American children significantly trailed white children in all subjects tested at all grades. Other priorities intervened during Governor Ryan's administration, and despite compelling data of the problem and recommended solutions from budget reallocation to sweeping funding reform, the achievement of low-income students did not raise enough alarm among state legislators or most local school boards to drive large scale funding reform, to change the way teachers and administrators are trained, or to bring successful policies, practices and programs in the Golden Spike schools to scale. Since 1988, the achievement gap has been addressed by a handful of initiatives, such as early childhood education, reading intervention and a change in the poverty formula. However, it has yet to command

attention of a "Governor's Summit" or even a legislative hearing. As a result, there has not been a systematic plan to attack this problem.

Neglecting or avoiding this matter is not just a problem in Illinois. As Mica Pollock (2001) writes:

> *"People in schools and districts across the country routinely resist talking about even the most blatant racial achievement disparities ... in many of our schools and districts, racial achievement patterns have become ironically secretive, submerged problems waiting to be discovered as well as obvious problems waiting to be remedied."*

***Ignored or not, the achievement gap is the single most critical educational problem in our state, if not the country.*** How serious is the achievement gap? Consider these statistics that show no matter what the grade level or subject tested, there is an enormous difference between the achievement of boys and girls from poor families and their peers:

On the 2001 third grade ISAT, 40% of low-income students meet state reading standards compared to 75% of their peers. That means that a full 60% of third grade students (approximately 24,000 kids) from low-income families cannot meet state reading standards in third grade. If they cannot read at a level with their peers, they will struggle throughout school (figure 1).

Reading results for grades five and eight are similar. At these grades only 36% and 44% of the students, respectively, meet state standards compared to 70% and 74% of their more well-to-do classmates (figure 2).

The gap is not limited to reading. In eighth grade less than one in five poor children meets state mathematics standards compared to about 60% of their peers. In fifth grade the gap is 37% vs. 74% and at third grade 53% vs. 86% (figure 3).

High schools cannot make up the difference. Looking at Illinois' 2001 Prairie State Examination, one finds large and significant difference between the percentage of low-income students meeting state standards and their peers. The differences are 32% in reading, 34% in writing, 36% in mathematics, 36% in social studies and 38% in science. In mathematics, less than one in four low-income children meet state standards, and in science, the number drops to fewer than one in five (figure 4). In real numbers, about 30,000 out of the 40,000 grade eleven students from low-income families do not meet state standards in mathematics and science. For these students opportunities for further education in mathematics and science will be limited or non-existent, and most career paths will be closed.

Not only is the size of the gap cause for alarm, the numbers of children impacted exceed the **entire** populations of Rockford, Peoria, Decatur and Springfield combined. A full 37.8% of the 2.1 million children in Illinois come from low-income families. The data

show that not even half of these children meet state standards, which means that approximately 500,000 boys and girls from low-income families are struggling. Put bluntly, a lot of kids are facing a stark, bleak future. The consequences for these children, their families, their communities and our state are costly and troublesome. The crisis is real and the crisis is big!

Given that children of color are disproportionately represented in the low-income count, the achievement gap becomes more pernicious. For example, at third grade, just one in three African American third grade students meet state standards compared to 75% of white students (figure 5). Even in the earliest grades, poor, black children are not getting the education they need and deserve. Here, in the Land of Lincoln, home of the Great Emancipator, we find Hispanic and African-American children achieving at levels far below their white and Asian peers. Consider these figures (figures 6 –9) that show the differences in percentages of students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading, mathematics and writing by racial and ethnic group at both the elementary and secondary grade levels.

Note how the gaps do not close. For example, in third grade reading, 75% of white students meet state standards compared to 33% of African American students and 47% of Hispanic/Latino students. In eleventh grade, the figures are 65% of white students, 31% of African American students, and 35% of Hispanic/Latino students. The mathematics achievement gap is worse as the performance of all students declines, but achievement of minority children drops precipitously. In third grade 87% white of white students meet state standards as compared to 44% and 63% of their African American and Hispanic/Latino peers, respectively. By junior year, the percentage of students meeting state standards are 63% white, 20% African American, 29% Hispanic/Latino.

The achievement gap is just as evident when we look at performance by schools.

Using the ACT score of the 114,000 juniors who took this examination as part of the Illinois Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE), the data show that the average ACT score of schools with more than half of their students from low-income schools was 15.3 compared to an average of 19.5 for those schools with fewer than half of their students from low income families (figure 10).

Even more telling is the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards on the Prairie State Examination. Looking at mathematics, we find that 55.1% of the students in the schools with less than half the kids from low-income families meet state standards compared to just 17.3% of students in the high poverty schools (figure 11).

For the PSAE as a whole, 20.5% of students in the high poverty schools meet or exceed state standards compared to almost 57% of students in schools enrolling fewer than half of their students from low-income families (figure 12).

Just 6.25 % of high poverty high schools have half the students meeting PSAE standards compared to 73.6 % of the other high schools (figure 13). This is an achievement gap.

At the elementary level, fewer than 33% of the 915 elementary schools with more than half their students from low income families have half of their students meeting third grade reading standards compared to almost 96% of the schools with less than half of their students from low income families (figure 14).

In real numbers, a mere 40 of the 915 (4.5%) high poverty elementary schools have had an average of two-thirds of their students meeting state standards the past three years. This compares with 1,562 (72.1 %) of the other elementary schools (figure 15).

Though the "achievement gap" is measured by test scores, it is not just about test scores. It is about opportunities that some students have and others never will. It is about choices some students have and others never will. It is about schools that are bridges to a productive life and schools that are chasms. The scores cited above reflect the current state of education for Illinois' sons and daughters. One can argue that state test scores may not measure abstracts like self-esteem, creativity, leadership, teamwork or a variety of other attributes that contribute to success. They do, however, validly and reliably measure learning and learning matters a lot to future success and is inexorably intertwined with abstract attributes. For example, Dorothy Strickland (2001) notes, "Those who have turned their attention to early intervention {in reading} state that it is ultimately less costly than years of remediation, less costly than retention, and less costly to students' self-esteem (Barnett, 1998). This final point may be the most compelling of all because the saving in human suffering and humiliation is incalculable."

The achievement gap is not about students who are failing; it is about the schools and the system that has failed students. The fact that the large majority of poor students, many of whom are African American and Latino children, are not meeting state standards is a disservice and a disgrace to our youth, our communities, and our state. Despite long strides made toward racial and economic equality in our great state, our educational system, our educational and legislative leaders, and our state policy makers have yet to attend to the needs and the educational rights of poor, minority children. The primary reason for not addressing the achievement gap may not be lack of funds or political will as has been posited in the past. It may be because no one really knows what to do. The remainder of this paper will show what some schools are doing and what can be done on a statewide basis to close "public enemy number one," the achievement gap.

## What Research Says about Closing the Gap

Though the achievement gap is a well-documented national phenomenon, it has not made front-page news beyond one story in the *Chicago Tribune* (Banchero, 2001) and as part of a few featured pieces in the *St. Louis Dispatch* and *Belleville News Democrat*. It has not been a topic of conversation among educators, much less policy makers and the public. As a local issue, it is more often ignored than publicized (Pollock, 2001). Neglecting this issue is not solely the fault of educators and school boards or of the media. Jencks and Phillips (1998) point to their own field: "Psychologists, sociologists

and educational researchers have devoted far less attention to the test score gap over the past quarter century than its political and social consequences warranted. Most social scientists have chosen safer topics and hoped the problem would go away. It didn't." As a result, few solutions are available and little research on effective programs and practices exists. The research that does exist is informative, however.

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL) recently completed a study of high performing high poverty schools in Wisconsin (NCREL, 2000). They found these schools had some common characteristics. Though none of the schools had all characteristics, all of them had more than one of the following:

- **Leadership**
  - –Purposeful and proactive administrative leadership
  - –Sense of community
  - –Data based decision-making and program monitoring
  - –Student centered programs and services designed around individual needs
  - –High expectations for all students
- **Professional Development**
  - –Staff initiated professional development
  - –Opportunities for staff interaction
  - –Peer coaching and mentoring
- **Curriculum and Instruction**
  - –Emphasis on project-based instruction (though teacher directed was the norm)
  - –Curriculum aligned with state standards
  - –Use of local and state assessment data
- **Parent/Community Involvement**
  - –Multiple means of contacting and working with parents
  - –School as community center
- **Structure/Organization**
  - –Small class sizes
  - –Alternative support programs

Likewise, ISBE surveyed about 90 schools that had more than 50% of students meeting standards on the 2001 ISAT and more than 50% from low-income families. They also visited some of these schools. Many of their findings were similar to those of the NCREL study. Twenty-six schools responding to the survey reported the following qualities were evident: (ISBE, 2001)

- **Leadership**
  - –Sets high expectations
  - –Provides safe environment
  - –Focuses on priority issues and assures resources support them

–Promotes buy-in by whole staff
–Recruits and retains best teachers
–Feel accountable for performance

- **Professional Development**
  - –Teachers trained in curriculum and instruction
  - –Opportunities for staff collaboration
  - –Strong support for beginning teachers
  - –Guided by school improvement plan
- **Curriculum and Instruction**
  - –Clear emphasis on basics
  - –Extra help and time for students
  - –Monitoring of student progress
  - –Data driven decision making
  - –High academic learning time
- **Parent involvement**
  - - Involves the community in schooling

A significant nationwide piece of research, The Education Trust's *Dispelling the Myth* (1999) study involved a survey of high-poverty, high performing high schools. They found the following characteristics were common among the schools.

- Schools use standards extensively to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work and evaluate teachers.
- Instructional time for reading and mathematics are increased.
- They devote a larger proportion of funds to support professional development focused on changing instructional practice.
- Implement comprehensive systems to monitor individual student progress and provide extra support to student as soon as it is needed
- Focus efforts to involve parents on helping students meet standards.
- Have accountability systems in place that have real consequences for adults in the schools.

In addition, several other studies of individual schools identify commonalities of success. One of the federal Comprehensive School Reform models, "Success for All" (Slavin, 1996), identified:

- Leadership
- Commitment of entire staff
- Extensive professional development
- Intensive early literacy support
- Data driven instructional decision making and student monitoring

The Bennet Kew School (Richardson, 2002) in California, an East Los Angeles school that regularly outperforms its affluent neighbor in Beverly Hills and Irvine succeeds because teachers at the school:

- Analyze student data
- Use that data to determine areas where teachers need to improve
- Have time to work together to write lessons and prepare classroom assessments
- Use reading coaches to work "elbow to elbow" with classroom teachers, especially new teachers.

Likewise, districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap, such as Brazosport, TX and Pinellas County, FL, claim that their success is based upon:

- Application of Baldrige principles and values
- Data driven decision-making
- High expectations
- Emphasis on early literacy
- Full involvement of staff and community

The academic research community has also identified potential interventions that can help high poverty low performing schools improve. Dorothy Strickland (2001) cited specific practices including:

- Early intervention and prevention more effective than remediation
- Systematic program of home support
- More academic learning time
- Careful selection of curriculum and ready access to literature
- Monitor individual progress
- Professional development for ALL staff working with disadvantaged children

Richard Elmore (2000) discussed the lack of school staff and district staff capacity for high poverty low achieving schools to improve. He indicated that low performing schools' internal capacity for accountability is lacking, as are internal improvement strategies. Because limited or no staff capacity (knowledge and skills) to develop and implement these strategies exists, he says they should be taught:

> *A major finding of our initial case study research was that most of the schools in our study did not have well-developed internal accountability systems ... In fact, in the modal school, individual teacher beliefs dominated decisions about instructional practice, collective expectations were weak, and internal accountability systems were under-specified ... Similarly, less well-situated schools don't simply do poorly under performance-based accountability systems because they enter with initial demographic and academic disadvantages; they actually lose ground relative to the well-situated schools because they fail to develop the kind of internal improvement strategies that well-situated schools do ...*

> *Our case studies suggest, then, that, left to their own devices, schools, especially low performing schools, will not spontaneously develop the capacities they need to respond to performance-based accountability systems, and the existing external remedies for dealing with the low capacity of low-performing schools are not adequately specified to address the problem. It makes sense in the context to treat the problem of capacity as a problem of skill and knowledge. That is, to understand the components of capacity in ways that are, in some sense, teachable.*

Grissmer et al (2000) to conclude that the achievement gap could effectively be addressed by targeting resources to disadvantaged families and schools, lowering class size in early grade, strengthening early childhood and early intervention programming, and improving teacher education and professional development. They also cited the need for extensive further research.

Ronald Ferguson (1998) looked at teachers' characteristics and qualities. He found that teachers' perceptions and expectations are critical, and often contribute to the problem. He concluded that teachers have lower expectations for African American students' potential and effort than for white students. Additionally, he notes that because most teachers base their expectation of black children on past performance and behaviors, the teachers themselves perpetuate the gap: "My bottom line conclusion is that teachers' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand, the black white test score gap." On a positive note, he discovered that high quality professional development with sustained support can change teachers' beliefs and practices. He also cited research showing the importance of the teacher to student ratios for children from low-income families and that the responsiveness of these children to their teachers depends a great deal on their perceptions of whether the teacher cares for them and respects them.

Richard Rothstein's (2001) inquiry took an entirely different perspective in looking beyond school walls. Though he understands that school improvement is critically important, he contends that it alone will not make a difference.

> *"Clearly, if the achievement gap is to be narrowed further, and perhaps be closed, investments in both schools and social institutions are needed ... Policy is crippled if it proceeds on the basis that only school improvement is needed to narrow the achievement gap. School improvement is unlikely to succeed if not complemented by improvements in other, equally important educational institutions: families, communities and the social and economic environment."*

He claims that significant progress toward closing the achievement gap could be made if public policy focused on strengthening families and communities, attending to health and nutrition needs, and improving family housing and income.

Supporting this view is Dorothy Strickland (2001) who writes, "Children who attend school and live in communities in which low socioeconomic status is widespread are more likely to be at risk for failure in reading." She continues, citing the work of Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998), "Families that lack sufficient resources to provide adequate housing, health care, and nutrition for their children are less likely to focus on their children's educational needs."

Finally, a significant body of research exists supporting early childhood education as the most effective intervention (e.g. Ramey and Ramey, 1998; Thomas and Bainbridge, 2001; Karoly et al, 1998). Jencks and Phillips (1998) note, "If we want equal outcomes among twelfth-graders, we will also have to narrow the skill gap between black and white children before they enter school." This is a critical point. Much has been written about the impact of poverty on family structure, drug and alcohol use, violence, and the like, but one of the most deleterious impacts is on children's linguistic development (Whitehurst, 2001). Impoverished students are far more likely than their classmates to enter school "linguistically disadvantaged" because they do not have experiences that will promote literacy and reading readiness:

> *"Children from low-income families are substantially behind their more affluent peers in both ... components of pre-reading. For instance, the typical child in some urban public schools enters kindergarten at the fifth percentile in vocabulary knowledge, and does not know words such as chicken, leaf and triangle."*
>
> Citing Hart and Riley, he continues, *"The professional families' children at age three actually had a larger recorded vocabulary than the welfare families' parents. I will say that again, the three year olds from the affluent families had larger spoken vocabularies than the parents from welfare families."*

Faced with such obstacles, schools represent the only hope for children to acquire early literacy skills that will in turn enable them to acquire and apply concepts and skills throughout their schooling and in all subject areas. As both a researcher and ranking educational leader in the Bush administration, Whitehurst has been able to drive both policy and money to support early childhood education, early literacy and early intervention for struggling students.

In summary, the research clearly points to some commonalities of what can and in some cases, does close the achievement gap. Leadership that establishes a culture of high expectations is certainly key. An emphasis on early literacy and academic learning time both during and beyond the school day are two essential policies and practices. School-wide use of data also seems to be a critical component, as does parental involvement. Accountability matters as well.

Though this research is helpful, understanding how these components translate to practice; i.e. what they "look like" in action is essential to replicating them in high

poverty, low performing (HP/LP) schools. The first order of business, though, is to develop testable hypotheses and see if these components and others suggested by the research actually exist in high poverty, high performing Golden Spike schools.

## Research Hypotheses

Examining this existing research, the researcher hypothesized that high performing, high poverty schools in Illinois would have most or all of the following characteristics:

- Small enrollment and small class sizes;
- Strong leadership advocating high learning standards and expectations for all;
- Extensive use of data to drive instructional decisions;
- Good teachers;
- An internal capacity for accountability;
- An emphasis on early literacy;
- Extensive parental involvement;
- High quality professional development;
- More academic learning time;
- A standards-based curriculum
- Attention to health and safety needs of students; and
- Ready access to early childhood education programs.

These hypotheses fall into broad categories of leadership, personnel, school characteristics, curriculum and instruction, and community factors. Leadership encompasses advocacy of high standards and expectations, data driven decision making, and building the internal capacity for accountability. Personnel include good teachers and high quality professional development. School characteristics are enrollment and class size. Curriculum and instruction includes an emphasis on early literacy, academic learning time, and a standards-based curriculum. The community factors are extensive parental involvement, attention to the health and safety needs of students and ready access to early childhood education programs.

## Methodology

The Golden Spike Schools (high poverty, high performing) were identified in two ways. Schools with more than half of the students from low-income families formed the pool of high poverty schools. "Low-income" is defined as a student who receives free or reduced federal lunch. Illinois uses this measure, not the federal measure of Title I eligibility, when reporting and disaggregating student data for the purpose of reporting student achievement. In 2001 there were 919 high poverty schools, representing about 29.6% of all elementary schools. Approximately 500,000 or 25% of the entire Illinois school population are educated in these schools. Schools in this group that solely served the gifted and talented were excluded from the sample.

From this pool, the schools were selected based on three years of results from the annual state assessment (ISAT) data in two different ways:

The first criterion for selection was that schools had TOTAL ISAT scores which averaging 66% or better the last three years. Though ISBE currently uses 50% as the "passing criterion," using this bar to label high poverty schools "high performing" does a disservice to children in high poverty schools. It sets expectations too low. Having one out of every two students meet state standards is not acceptable for most schools, regardless of the low-income population, and it should not be acceptable for high poverty schools. Two out of three students meeting state standards is still a far cry from the 90-100% that the public would like to see, but it is certainly a more rigorous—and acceptable—standard than 50%. The total ISAT score, as determined by the ISBE is the percentage of all tests given at each school that meet or exceed state standards. By using all tests--reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies--and all grade levels, one avoids scores being skewed by one grade or one test. More importantly, though, it is a better measure of a comprehensive education at the school level than any individual test.

Forty schools (4.4%) met this criterion. That is, forty schools had two out of every three students meet or exceed state standards the past two years.

The second criterion had two parts. Schools had to have demonstrated an overall increase of 10% of the students meeting or exceeding standards on the combined ISAT and had at least 66% of all students meeting or exceeding standards in 2001. The rationale for this two-component criterion is that these schools have shown sustained, steady improvement, indicating that they are doing something to help poor, minority students succeed that the other schools are not. Twenty-two schools met this criterion, three of which were duplicated, leaving nineteen new schools. These nineteen schools represent 2.4% of the high poverty sample that had three years of ISAT testing, compared to 309 schools or 15.3% of the low poverty schools that had three years of ISAT testing and actually had room to improve by 10% over three years.

Applying these selection criteria resulted in a total sample size is 59 schools, or 6.5% of the high poverty schools.

It is important to note that all the criteria involved success during a three year period. It is statistically well established that scores from one year to another can vary greatly depending upon the size of the population being tested (Kane, Staigler and Geppert, 2002). In many Illinois schools, there are less than thirty students at a grade level. With such a small sample, one can expect some significant swings based upon characteristics of students, the particular testing environment or something that happened on test day. Comparing the scores of one group of a dozen students to another dozen the following year does not make a reliable comparison. Using multi-year data instead of a single year data greatly reduces potential identification errors due to small school testing populations and also ensures that schools selected have a solid track record of high performance and/or continuous improvement. Finally, meaningful, institutionalized improvement occurs over a period of years, not just in one year.

Interview data was also collected from half of the schools, covering some schools in each of six regions of the state. Schools in which personnel were selected for interview represented a distribution of size, racial distribution of the student population and classification as urban, rural, or suburban. To validate interview data, half of these schools and districts were visited for on-site observations and interviews with teachers and principals. Published materials and web based district documents were reviewed and the publicly available demographic data from the state report card was examined. The following two sections detail these findings.

Quantitative Findings

The demographics of the fifty-nine Golden Spike schools are similar to the demographics of the group of 850 HP/LP schools. In fact, these groups look more alike than they do different. The range of any given demographic variable for the Golden Spike schools is about as large as the range for HP/LP schools (see Table Two below). For example, enrollment in the former ranges from sixty to 1880 and class sizes from nine to thirty-two. The latter group ranges from forty-four to over two thousand for enrollment, and from two to forty-two for class size.

Looking at school characteristics in the 2000 state report card, one finds that grade spans were varied; ten housed students from kindergarten through eighth grade and eleven kindergarten through sixth grade. There were K-3 schools, K-5 schools and even one fourth grade school. The one real anomaly was that there were no junior high/middle schools (grades six, seven and eight) among the Golden Spike schools.

Turning to student characteristics, fifteen of the Golden Spike schools had an enrollment of at least 50% minority students. These schools were located in urban environments or Chicago suburbs with predominantly minority populations. Most of the other schools were in rural areas or smaller towns such as Galesburg and Quincy. 30.3% of the schools had a mobility rate above the state average, and 80.3% had an attendance rate at or above the state average. The within-group ranges for minority, mobility and attendance rate are illustrated in Table Two. Again, the ranges are similar except for the percentage of Hispanic students and "other" minorities.

**TABLE TWO**
**Ranges of Demographic Variables in Golden Spike and HP/LP Schools**
**(Chicago Schools Included)**

| Demographic/School Characteristic | High Poverty/High Performance | | High Poverty/Low Performance | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | High | Low | High |
| Enrollment | 60 | 1880 | 44 | 2076 |
| Class Size | 9 | 32 | 2 | 42 |
| % White | 0.5 | 100 | 0 | 100 |
| % Black | 0 | 99.5 | 0 | 100 |
| % Hispanic | 0 | 77.1 | 0 | 100 |
| % Other | 0 | 26.6 | 0 | 67.4 |
| Attendance | 78.6 | 96.8 | 75.5 | 99.7 |
| Mobility | 5.7 | 52.1 | 3.4 | 109.1 |

Before analyzing demographic differences between the means, the Chicago HP/LP schools were removed from the sample. Chicago truly is a special case, and using the

400+ schools in this single district as a comparison is misleading because no other community in Illinois comes close to Chicago in size and complexity. For good reason, Chicago is treated as a separate entity throughout the Illinois *School Code*. It will also be treated as a separate entity in this analysis of demographics. Were Chicago schools to be included, they would skew the statistics of the HP/LP in all district level variables and arguably most school level variables as well as to render any comparative data meaningless (for example, the average enrollment in the high poverty Chicago schools is 712 compared to the average enrollment of 393 in all other high poverty schools). Moreover, just the number of schools in Chicago, 442, is almost as many as high poverty schools throughout the state (467). The table below, then, gives a more accurate comparison of Golden Spike to HP/LP schools across the state.

The reader should be reminded that all data in the table come from the 2000 Report Card. This year is used because the criteria for performance were achievement and improvement during the 1999-2001 three year period. The 2000 data is the middle of this range. The reader should also note the use of a stringent significance level of $p<.01$ (meaning that there is less than a one in one hundred probability that the difference in the mean scores is due to chance). Table Three shows the demographic differences (significant differences are italicized) in mobility, the percentage the school district spent on instruction and third grade class size (the grade at which ISAT is tested).

**TABLE THREE**
**Means of Demographic Variables in Golden Spike and HP/LP Schools**
**(Chicago Schools Excluded)**

| **Characteristic** | **HP/HP** | **HP/LP** | **P value** |
|---|---|---|---|
| School level | | | |
| Enrollment | 325 | 402 | .017 |
| Attendance rate | 94.3 | 93.6 | .024 |
| *Mobility rate* | *23.6* | *30.3* | *.008* |
| Class size grade 1 | 19.2 | 20.7 | .032 |
| *Class size grade 3* | *19.9* | *21.8* | *.003* |
| Class size grade 8 | 21.0 | 20.1 | .839 |
| District level | | | |
| Instructional $ PP | $3944 | $3875 | .427 |
| *$ OPP for instruction* | *50.7* | *47.9* | *.0001* |
| Teacher experience | 15.7 | 15.4 | .445 |

Perhaps the most striking finding is that these schools are not dramatically different. Though the mean enrollment of the Golden Spike schools was 325 compared to 402 for the HP/LP schools, the difference was not significant to the .01 level ($p=.02$). Advocates for reducing school size might point out that by using $p<.05$ as the significance level, enrollment is significantly different and thus small schools generally have students who

achieve at higher rates. This is a faulty conclusion. First of all, in looking at statewide data, the correlation between enrollment and ISAT performance is about -.22. Statistically, the correlation is small. Practically, 325 students is not a lot less than 402. Given that most schools spanned at least six grades, this translates into about one more section of enrollment for each grade level. Intuitively—and actually—having either two sections or three sections at grade level is hardly an explanation for success. Thus, school enrollment differences of eighty students should certainly not be the basis for a state or federal policy decision that drives millions (or billions) of dollars to reduce school size.

That said, the reader should note that several of the principals did cite small schools as a reason for success. Having a small school enables them to spend more time with staff and students, allows them to work with teachers to analyze data, and limits the number of distractions that take them away from their leadership role. These principals were from the smaller schools in the sample, those of 200 or less. Again, however, school size is not the answer, for although there were eighteen schools of 200 or fewer students in the HP/HP sample, there are sixty-three schools of fewer than 200 in the HP/LP sample. It appears that school leadership and several other factors as described in the following section, rather than school size, makes a difference. The evidence is favor of small schools is far from conclusive and certainly merits further research.

A second finding—regarding third grade class size—is actually more of a non-finding. A mean class size difference of two (20 to 22) is probably not big enough to change instruction, afford a teacher much more time for working with individual children or their families. Statewide, the correlation between third grade class size and third grade ISAT reading scores is significant, but small. Third grade class size has no causal effect when controlling for percentage of low-income students. The finding does tell us that the third grades in HP/HP schools are likely to be a bit smaller, but not to the degree to which the Tennessee STAR (Mosteller, 1995) study indicated smaller classes make a difference in student achievement ("smaller" meaning closer to fifteen students than twenty).

A third finding—and another "non-finding"—is the difference in the percentage of the amount the district spends on instruction. Because the ISBE collects district data and not school data, one cannot tell if the percentage spent on instruction at the school is the same, more or less than the district level. One of the most frustrating aspects of making demographic comparisons is having to use district level data instead of school level data for instructional dollars per pupil and percentage of operating budget spent on instruction. Having school level data could be very helpful in explaining why some low-income schools in larger districts such as Peoria, Springfield and East St. Louis excel, while others do not. For example, in small districts such as Galesburg, one school is in the Golden Spike group, while another is on the state's academic watch list. One cannot draw any conclusions about what is happening with these special school cultures by relying on state collected district level data. It is only safe to say that the districts housing Golden Spike schools spend a higher percentage on instruction than HP/LP districts.

Moreover, given that the cost of living index across Illinois has a range of more than 50% (from approximately .80 in Pope County to 1.25 in Lake County), just reporting costs per pupil invites meaningless comparatives and renders any analysis invalid and ultimately ineffective. The State Board must report data on a regional cost-adjusted basis. Using non-adjusted data to make public policy decisions about the foundation level, poverty weighting and the like on non-indexed data results in disadvantages to Cook and collar county districts—especially those with a large percentage of low-income students who receive a high portion of state aid.

In addition, ISBE needs to compile teacher data at the school level in order to judge accurately if and to what extent teacher experience, teacher salaries, and instructional spending impact student learning. For example, at one of the Golden Spike schools in Galesburg, there is a veteran staff, with an "entrepreneurial flair." From state data, however, one cannot determine the teacher experience between this school and the watch list school.

A fourth finding concerns mobility rate, and it appears to be important. We know that after controlling for the percentage of low-income students, mobility does not correlate highly with the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards on ISAT tests. When we look at just the high poverty schools, however, the data in Table Two indicate that there is a significant difference in the mobility rate between Golden Spike schools and HP/LP schools. For whatever reason(s), student turnover is less frequent. On one hand, this turnover certainly helps the schools in their endeavors to work with students from one year to the next, to develop a solid working relationship with families and to ensure that students have a sequential curriculum. On the other hand, reasons families may choose to stay at these schools is that they do deliver a high quality of education or that they have a personal attachment lacking in HP/LP schools Relatively low mobility (the rate of 23.9 is still above the 2000 state average of 17.5) does make a difference and further research is necessary to ascertain its impact.

The first hypothesis, that Golden Spike schools would have small enrollments and small class sizes cannot be conclusively stated as true or false. Though enrollments and class sizes are smaller, the level of significance is borderline ($.05>p>.01$). The issue merits additional research, but once again, one can conclude from this research that public policies that pour millions or even billions of dollars into making schools or class sizes smaller might be far more effectively used in bringing the best practices of the Golden Spike schools to scale and/or funding the policy recommendations discussed below.

An unanticipated finding was that the Golden Spike schools have a significantly lower mobility rate than HP/LP schools—although both are still higher than the state average. Whether stability contributes to success or success contributes to stability is a key question for further examination. Also, the impact of mobility may be non-linear. As mobility increases, achievement might fall off at an accelerating rate.

An important concluding observation is that the districts are more alike than different. Public policy which attempts to change demographics is not likely to produce better

results. The Golden Spike schools have found a way to succeed where the HP/LP schools have not. They have not done it by drastically lowering class size, spending more money or making small schools. How have they have done it? The real story unfolds with the qualitative findings.

## Qualitative Findings

The interviews and visits yielded some clear findings about each of the hypotheses. The following characteristics were commonalities in more than 90% of the high poverty, high performing Golden Spike schools:

- Strong leadership advocating high learning standards and expectations for all;
- An emphasis on early literacy;
- Good teachers;
- More academic learning time; and
- Extensive parental involvement.

The following were evident in at least half of the Golden Spike schools:

- Extensive use of data to drive instructional decisions;
- An internal capacity for accountability;
- High quality professional development (on a school wide basis);
- Ready access to early childhood education programs; and
- Attention to health and safety needs of students.

The following were not commonalities to any significant extent:

- Professional development (on an individual basis); and
- A standards-based curriculum.

It was not one particular category--leadership, personnel, curriculum and instruction, or community factors--that mattered, but the presence of all of them in some form. Some Golden Spike Schools had one component that was stronger than another, but what mattered is that all were present.

After reviewing the findings for each hypothesis in some detail, the researcher shows what these look like in a series of brief vignettes that profile a particular finding in action.

### Strong leadership advocating high learning standards and expectations for all

The principals in the fifty-nine schools represent a solid cross section of educational leaders. Some are brand new to the job, others are seasoned veterans; some are black, some are white; some are men, some are women; and some are charismatic extroverts and others are quiet introverts. All of them, however, are leaders of learning—for both

staff and students. The principals work hard at being visible. There are incredible demands on their time, but there is always time for a walk through. They believe that the kids have to know them.

The principals think strategically. They are well-read and current, and they are perceived as knowledgeable. Staff meetings are mini-workshops, a chance to be professionals. They understand the demands of working with low-income students and ensure that behavior does not get in the way of learning.

The principals are resourceful. In lean financial times, they strive to preserve proven programs at all costs. They understand and "walk the talk" of hiring and keeping good people. They aggressively pursue grants to fund programs and practices and then stick with them long after funding expires. They create a culture around a shared pride of success.

The principals lead by example. They share a remarkable work ethic and have positive relationships with staff and students. "We work hard but we have fun," recounted one teacher. The principals have earned a reputation for doing "whatever it takes" to help students, including house calls with teachers. The teachers rely on them to set the tone with parents. They are collegial and respectful of staff and students. They focus on results and have high expectations. They help teachers deal with state mandates and model the belief that every child can succeed. Young or old, thin or not, they exude high energy. They are aggressive about getting books and recognize and commend excellence. Empathy for teachers' tasks is evident, but several remarked how their "no excuses" policy is accepted by teachers. They encourage innovation and they have the courage to take on the bad teachers. Many are model teachers themselves. Some have spent many years in the classroom, some were former Title I teachers, and some were former special education teachers. In any case, almost all school leaders make it a practice of doing some teaching or other demonstration work.

Leadership is a shared commitment. They foster teacher leadership. Teachers are given time to work together within their school and across their district. At one particularly successful school, the teachers lead the staff meetings. These, as well as staff meetings in most of the HP/HP schools, are more like mini-workshops on instruction or assessment. One teacher remarked, "Our principal gets buy-in. She makes the school warm and inviting for all."

The principal's direct involvement in the teaching and learning process is critical. As one teacher told ISBE, "our staff is very involved in continuous improvement. We work together in teams and make instructional decisions together. We all share the responsibility for continuous improvement … our staff is very familiar with our school goals and our school improvement plan… Adjustments are made to our structure based on assessment results." Says another of her principal, "The principal constantly monitors classroom and student progress. If she finds deficiencies, she looks to find the causes and then makes changes to eliminate them—even moving teachers from grade to grade, if

necessary. She does an informal performance check frequently and makes sure horizontal and vertical articulation occurs."

Principals in improving schools understand the importance of opportunity and the pain of being at the edge of failure. One school had had such a dismal record of performance that the superintendent had wanted to make it an Edison School. The principal and teachers were given a one-year reprieve, which proved to be the impetus they needed to improve. In another, the principal had to turn around a decline in achievement that had led to a malaise among staff and an atmosphere of resignation to their fate. The principal of one school found grant funding for extensive professional development; another used grant funds to pay parent tutors who had been trained to assist teachers. Improvement resulted. Both schools were able to turn around their scores as "success begat success."

The principals created a collective commitment to success. For example, one explained how the ISAT is not a third grade test or fifth grade test, but it is a test of the entire school. In HP/HP schools, everyone shares the responsibility for student success. One teacher described her school culture as "can do/will do."

***A key commonality among all of the Golden Spike schools, then, is the high quality leadership of the principal, a teacher or a small group of teachers.***

Extensive use of data to drive instructional decisions

Assessment matters to these teachers and they use test results wisely. Though most prefer local assessments to the ISAT, the teachers and the principals realize it is the measure by which schools—and even their individual—abilities are judged. In one school, ISAT testing was called the "crisis cycle" because of the students' and staff's anxiety prior to the test, their discouragement during the test, and their need to rebuild children's sense of accomplishment and self worth after the test. Objections to the ISAT are primarily concerned with how progress is measured and reported rather than the difficulty for the test. They are disturbed that results are returned too late to use for school improvement planning or modifying curriculum and instruction. Principals also noted that using the one year snapshot of children meeting standards is demoralizing because several students make exceptional progress but still cannot reach state standards. Principals told of several children who made gains of two or more years in a year's time yet still fell below state standards. Not opposed to accountability, they prefer that success be measured by a child's progress each year and not a mean score or percentage of students meeting state standards.

That said, principals and teachers use data extensively. Most of the schools have an established process for collecting, compiling and examining data from several sources—local assessment, ISAT, nationally normed tests, reading readiness tests and textbook tests. They then used this data to drive decisions about curriculum, instruction and staff development.

***Another important commonality among some, but not all, of the Golden Spike schools, then, is the staff use of data to develop school improvement plans and drive decisions about curriculum and instruction.***

Good teachers

Having visited with staff and walked through HP/HP buildings, the researcher discovered that teachers in these schools are truly exemplary professionals. It is abundantly clear that these teachers sincerely believe that all students could learn and their behaviors reflect this belief. As a group they have a fierce pride in assuring that each child succeed. More than one said, "We are on a mission." They are not invested in children's success to protect their job or make the school "look good;" rather, they treat each child as their own—close relationships, mutual respect and admiration, and genuine fondness characterize the classrooms. Positive messages abound, whether in personal interactions or displays on the walls. Though extraordinarily compassionate, these teachers are not about to accept excuses for low achievement or lack of effort; rather, they incorporate a significant range of strategies and use a vast array of resources to help each individual child.

Many classrooms have substantial classroom libraries that have been endowed primarily with the teachers' personal funds. Contrary to the climate in many public schools, good teaching is admired and respected, and good teachers are emulated, not belittled or ignored.

Most evident is a team spirit. The entire school exudes a zealous commitment to reaching each and every child. To spend even a few hours in one of these schools is to become a believer. With extraordinary work and appropriate support, nearly every child can reach state standards.

Contrary to many districts, where teachers do get "set in their ways," staff at the HP/HP schools use data and the School Improvement Plan to shape changes in instruction. Standards-based reform has enabled them to bring in more resources and to try innovative methods.

Another characteristic is the close bond among the teachers. "We are a family" and "our people genuinely care about each other" and "this is our house" are representative comments reflecting the tightly shared beliefs and support network that brings together the entire building—principal, teachers, aides, secretaries, custodians, etc. In these schools cooperation and communication flourished. Though occasional disagreements erupted, by and large they were families who had internal support, enjoyed each other, and were proud of their collective accomplishment above and beyond what they did in their own classrooms with their own students. A key piece of this culture is where students fit. The children are not "little people" "blank slates" or "empty buckets." They, too, are part of the family, and the culture of high performing schools includes

children and their families. Staff believes in the importance of knowing the whole child and working with his family. As one observed, "We have to know where the child lives."

A final common characteristic of staff is the work ethic. Working with a high percentage of high poverty students is extraordinarily demanding. Unlike schools serving a more wealthy students, one does not just start the day teaching knowing the kids will be ready to learn. First things come first. Said one principal, "The kids live in pain; they have garbage heaped on them so school must be safe and supportive." Every principal and if asked, every teacher, could share a story of the challenges children face as a matter of course. Neighborhoods are not always safe places, but sometimes the home can be more dangerous. Family trauma, hunger, toothaches become a part of daily life. The successful schools are those which work hard to assure nutrition, safety and security BEFORE teaching. The school day for these teachers begins well before 9:00 and lasts well past 3:00 p.m. More than a few recounted parent conferences in students' homes, in getting to school at 7:00 and staying well past 7:00 to work with parents or with students, to plan with other teachers, to prepare for the challenges of the next day. Principals and teachers told of their long hours, their visits to students and parents in their homes, the out of pocket money they spend on materials and the like. These stories were neither complaining nor boasting, just description of what it takes to help poor kids learn. Simply put, the school culture is one of hard work. Teaching at these schools is nothing like a more common description "of closing the door to teach what they wish, how they wish, when they wish." (Whitehurst)

Teachers in the Golden Spike schools share success and problems. The culture of mediocrity was conspicuously absent from these schools as was the assumption that "all teachers are excellent." Few worried about "saving face." Golden Spike teachers want to find ways to improve every day. They are risk-takers. Principals and teachers talked of long team meetings in which they discussed lessons that worked and asked for help in solving specific problems. Many of the schools had instituted cross-grade meetings, so consecutive grade levels could share needs and expectations.

***Along with the leadership of the principals, then, a key commonality among every Golden Spike school is a staff of remarkably talented and hard working teachers who share high expectations, aspirations and respect for all children and for each other.***

<u>An internal capacity for accountability</u>

As noted above most of the schools had an established process for collecting, compiling and examining data from several sources—local assessment, ISAT, nationally normed tests, reading readiness tests, and community surveys. Whether a faculty committee, internal review team or ad hoc group, a team took responsibility for analyzing test and survey data and then sharing their findings with the staff. These findings were used to create the school improvement plan (SIP). Principals reported active staff participation in internal review and the SIP process. They need a say in how to use results to improve teaching and learning. Principals treated the school improvement plan seriously and

spent time with it. It was a priority for them and their teachers. The SIP represented a collective commitment to a common agenda.

Teachers at these schools understood that they—as a team—were responsible for students' success. At one school, the teachers meet once a week to review progress and talk about problems. The meetings are led by teachers, not just principals.

***A further commonality among several Golden Spike schools is that they have developed and use an internal accountability system.***

An emphasis on early literacy

"Early literacy is a must," said one teacher. "Kids come to us not knowing their first and last names, not knowing their shapes, not knowing sounds. They have an impaired vocabulary and have little exposure to books or any print." Every school emphasizes early literacy and provides intervention for struggling readers. Although there is not one common, or even prevalent, reading series or curriculum, there are strong program commonalities. A large number of schools use 4-Block™ reading. 4 Block™ uses the entire morning to teach four language arts components every single day: guided reading, self-directed reading, writing and working with words. Reading instruction in these schools has a strong emphasis on phonics, fluency and vocabulary development along with comprehension. Reading Recovery is the most popular model to help children who cannot read well and it has proven extremely effective. To keep children reading and immerse them in texts, several schools use Accelerated Reader of the Star Reader program. Computer based reading instruction was also used in several primary grade classrooms. Lightspan and Breakthrough were frequently used.

Contrary to many HP/LP schools, most HP/HP classrooms have classroom library collections, even if the school library was limited (as many were). Principals and teachers found ways to get books into the classroom and then into the homes. "Books in a Bag" was one school's solution to be sure that parents read with students. They literally sent home a book in a baggie every Friday!

***Another critical commonality among all Golden Spike schools is the use of early literacy programs and early intervention programs for struggling readers in kindergarten, first and second grade.***

Extensive parental involvement

"Parenting practices almost certainly have more impact on children's cognitive development than preschool practices. Indeed, changing the way parents deal with their children may be the single most important thing we can do to improve children's cognitive skills." (Jencks and Phillips, 1998) Golden Spike schools realize that they cannot do the job alone. Parent engagement is essential. Entering kindergarten, some kids do not know letters from numbers, some don't know their last name, and as

Whitehurst observes, most have a very limited working vocabulary. In the upper grades, parents care, but many just do not have the time, energy, money or even will to face the daily monumental challenges poverty imposes. Teachers, then, extend exceptional effort in working with parents and communicating their expectations. They clearly describe what they need to do to assist their children with homework and with being prepared to learn each day. Frequent communication flows from school to home in the form of positive notes, homework folders and newsletters. Despite union contract working hours, plenty of teachers make the time to conduct home visits and home conferences or to be at school very early or very late to meet with parents. A lot of teachers and principals readily share their home phone numbers and e-mail addresses as well.

More than a few schools reported success in teaching parents how to parent. In North Chicago, a Family Support Team puts on parent training workshops. In Peoria, they actually show parents how to have a meal and interact with students. They show them how to set up a structure for success. John Jay School has theme-based after school learning programs for students and parents together. Ziebell has a lending library for parents. At one school, the teachers wear buttons at parent conferences saying "I'm Number Two" to get the parents to remember who the number one teacher is. "Parents," noted one superintendent, "do not have a sense of how important they are, and our teachers think hospitals and clinics should distribute videos to help them learn how important it is to be sure their children have a proper diet, are nurtured, are cuddled and are read to."

Principals and teachers extend themselves to make school a comforting, welcoming place. Each school finds a special way whether it is offering meals, holding a dance, having a "make and take" workshop, or offering English lessons. Parents are honored guests at the many classroom and school ceremonies and celebrations. HP/HP schools do a lot of celebrating and parents are invited to join in the festivities.

***A commonality among nearly all Golden Spike schools is aggressive effort to engage and involve parents in their child's education and to clarify their expectations.***

<u>High quality professional development</u>

Illinois has put tens of millions of dollars into a system of continuing professional development, into creating teacher standards, and into producing mandated teacher tests of content and pedagogy. Professional development in the HP/HP schools, however, looks far different, and as the data indicate, is far more successful than the current mandated training. These schools frequently have staff development activities that are delivered on site to the entire staff and that are tied to the school improvement plan. Whether the professional development is about character education, guided reading, technology applications or structured routines, teachers and administrators learn together as a team. Not only do they share a common body of knowledge, they share a commitment to the new practice and establish a team spirit. Following the professional development, they work as a team to incorporate their new learning into their instruction.

HP/HP schools provide abundant evidence that school-wide professional development works. On the contrary, not a single administrator spoke about the success of individuals pursuing their own professional development or the value of local professional development committees. In fact, several echoed the sentiments of one curriculum director who said, "We put an incredible amount of money into professional development but have really worked hard to avoid the one shot deals and sending individual teachers out to workshops and classes. They don't work, they aren't effective, and they take teachers away from kids." Although they did not deter teachers from furthering their own education and learning, they knew that what counted in the classroom was the team professional development.

Turning to teacher standards and testing, teaching in high poverty schools is a different experience than teaching in an affluent school. Teachers in high poverty schools need a more extensive skill set, not to mention a specialized knowledge, incredible commitment and boundless compassion. Further research on the connection between the printed teacher standards, the teacher content and pedagogy examinations and the actual practice of teaching in high poverty schools would be enlightening and important. Though beyond the scope of this research, my observation is that working in high poverty schools requires a higher set of standards and a whole set of abilities that do not appear in existing documents or tests. It is no surprise that most principals and teachers in high poverty schools do not pay them much attention. An additional area for fruitful research, then, would be to pursue the knowledge, skills and disposition that are necessary to be a successful educator in a high poverty school.

***A commonality among several, but not all, Golden Spike schools is school-wide, as opposed to individually pursued, professional development.***

<u>More academic learning time</u>

Although this paper is not a quantitative study of academic learning time, the researcher obtained substantial interview and observational data regarding its importance and the efforts of teachers and principals to maximize it. Many schools scheduled activities as a team so as to maximize large daily blocks of uninterrupted time. They even strove to minimize transition time between classes and even between lessons. After school activities were a critical component of many schools' success. Thousands of children in the HP/HP schools participated in at least one after school activity each week, and some participated on a daily basis. Whether a club to teach photography or prepare for the ISAT, students had many opportunities. In poor communities parents do not have the resources to promote after school activities even if they are available; consequently, after school learning time matters a great deal.

Also, summer school was used to extend academic learning time for a high percentage of students. Participation in four to six week summer school reading and/or mathematics classes was the norm. Principals expressed that summer is not just for academics but for immersion in field trips, classes and activities for enrichment and enhancement,

experiences and activities that may be the norm for middle class families, but not for children of poverty. Consequently, Franklin School assured that weekly swim lessons, visits to Meramec Caverns, the Science Center, Raging Rivers, the ball park were available to children by working with the Neighborhood Association. The staff understood that these are as important as academic tutoring, computer instruction and classes on problems solving—in real life, not just mathematics—which are also offered.

***A key commonality among all Golden Spike schools is to provide uninterrupted academic learning time during the day, reduce transition time between learning activities, provide after school programming and ensure quality summer school instruction, especially for struggling students.***

A Standards based curriculum

Despite research supporting standards based reform, there was little unsolicited mention of state standards by principals and almost none by teachers. They appeared aware of the standards, but with one exception, I did not observe classroom displays related to the Illinois Learning Standards. The data in this study support the contention that it is not the specific standards, but the fact that standards exist that matters. Teachers realize and believe that having high, rigorous standards means having high expectations. They also believe that having standards encourages them to use a repertoire of resources. As one observed, "We definitely have high expectations regarding student achievement in every subject area. These expectations are partly based on the Illinois Learning Standards. We also believe that we must accept each child wherever he is and take that child as far as he is capable. Our teachers have become quite competent and adapting and modifying instruction for students who are not functioning at grade level."

Arguably, the most standards driven school in the sample, Nielson School in Galesburg, succeeded because of an extended effort to develop local standards and assessments beginning in early 1997. Their local efforts preceded the state standards and state testing, and proved to be eminently successful in driving school improvement. Nielson's grade-by-grade standards are based on what their community believes are the critical knowledge and skills their children need to know. Results of their local assessments are used to drive school improvement, and professional development is school-wide, tied to the school improvement plan and primarily delivered during the summer months. Even the student report card is based on the local standards. Galesburg shows the value of standards driven instruction and illustrates the need for further research on the effectiveness of state vs. local standards based reform.

Though teachers generally do not like the ISAT for the pressure they and their students feel, they acknowledge it as the measure of the standards and realize it is "coin of the realm" for measuring Illinois schools. Additionally, some agree that a rigorous test can drive changes in curriculum and instruction that will enable students to achieve higher standards. For example, during one interview the researcher heard that the ISAT writing rubric as opening the door for expression and creativity. Though many teachers

throughout Illinois and some esteemed researchers have chastised the SBE for perpetuating formulaic writing through the ISAT (Hillocks, in press) and for "killing" creativity and interest, teachers in Golden Spike schools in Belleville have a different point of view. They have found that children have learned to write well and are proud of their writing.

The researcher's impression, then, is that instruction matters more than the standards. To be sure, having standards is important for creating high expectations and for providing "permission" or even motivation to teach differently than a text-based "one size fits all" curriculum. How the standards are taught appears to be more important than what specific ones are. Consequently, devoting extensive time and money to rewriting the Illinois Learning Standards would be far less effective than allocating time and money to helping local leaders improve instruction to meet the needs of disadvantaged children.

***A standards-driven curriculum is evident in some, but far from all Golden Spike schools. The extent to which standards are widely embraced in these schools, the extent to which they have changed curriculum and instruction, and the extent to which they are responsible for the extraordinary achievement in these schools are questions for further research.***

Attention to health and safety needs of students

The school leaders create safe and secure conditions—they set the table for learning. It is no coincidence that many of the successful Golden Spike schools are clean, even if some of the buildings are old and decrepit. Playgrounds are usable and pleasant. They work hard to keep the neighborhood clean and safe, organizing parents and teachers to help on Saturdays. Principals have created "safe" areas around the school and use peer mediation and character education programs to make the inside of the school safe for all students.

Moreover, the principals are active advocates of student nutrition. For example, during a visit a second grader brought a family size bag of corn chips and sixteen-ounce jar of salsa for lunch. The principal and teacher insisted he have a nutritious balance school lunch and save the chips and salsa for an after school snack to share with friends. Several have found creative ways to obtain vision and dental care and to partner with public health services to assure that each child stays healthy.

***Most Golden Spike schools make student nutrition, health and safety a top priority.***

Strong early childhood education programs.

Given the strong relationship between early childhood education and success in school, one would expect several schools to have with parent-infant programs, early childhood programs or some services to support early learning. Although some schools housed early learning programs, they were not prevalent. Lack of funds and lack of space were cited as significant obstacles. That said, most of the principals worked exceptionally

hard at communicating with parents and providers before children reached kindergarten. They shared expectations for school readiness with these parties and were often resourceful in communicating.

***Early childhood education programs are evident in some, but not all HP/HP schools. The principals do, however, realize the critical importance of early education and work hard to assure that parents provide quality early learning experiences.***

In conclusion, then, the qualitative data strongly support the contention that the "Golden Spike" HP/HP schools succeed because of the following attributes.

- *Strong, visible leadership advocating high learning standards, high expectations and a culture of success for all.* The principal creates a "can do/will do" culture built upon a mission, communication, and collaboration. He or she is a role model of hard work, unwavering commitment, expertise and resourcefulness. A "leader for learning," the principal is involved in improving instructional practices—not just curriculum "alignment." Active and visible, the principal is a presence in the school and local community and ensures that the accomplishments of students and the school are publicly recognized and celebrated.

- *An emphasis on early literacy.* Each school has a defined program of early literacy that allots substantial blocks of time for reading instruction, 4-Blocks™ being the most prevalent. HP/HP schools all assist struggling readers through Reading Recovery or similar practices based on tutoring children in phonics, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary to supplement classroom instruction. These schools allocate significant financial and human resources to assure all students read. Primary grade classrooms have substantial classroom libraries, and students in all classrooms have a myriad of reading activities and opportunities. Many teachers are trained or being trained in how to teach reading.

- *Talented, hard-working teachers who believe that every child can and will learn.* The teachers expect all students to achieve high standards and are adamant that children in their classes will not fail. They spend long hours before and after school preparing for the school day, meeting with parents and providing extra assistance to individual children. They work as teams within the school and collaborate with other teachers across grade levels. They believe in their school's mission and actively strive to reach it.

- *An internal capacity for accountability.* The School Improvement Plans are important to all staff members. These plans are based on measurable targets and drive instructional decisions. Everyone believes that they play a role in assuring targets are reached, and that professional development—for the entire staff—is tied to the plan.

- *Extensive staff use of data to drive instructional decisions.* Teachers use local, state and national assessment data to guide their teaching. They monitor student

progress regularly and demonstrate flexibility in modifying the curriculum and changing their instructional practices based on the individual needs of children.

- *Extensive parental involvement.* These schools make every parent welcome. School is a safe, supportive place for them as well as their students. Staff make expectations for parents clear and communicate with them frequently. There is a strong emphasis on positive communication. Parent education is a priority in many schools. These schools provide opportunities for parents to improve their literacy skills and learn about parenting.

- *High quality team based professional development.* Professional development is schoolwide. All teachers learn together. Instead of pursuing individual professional development goals, the staff learns as a team. More often than not, professional development is linked to the school improvement plan.

- *More academic learning time.* Principals work with teachers to maximize instructional time during the day. Big blocks of uninterrupted time are allocated for reading and literacy activities. In addition, schools provide ample opportunities for learning after school. Summer school for most students is a given.

- *Attention to health and safety needs of students.* HP/HP schools use character education, positive behavioral programs and/or peer mediation to create an atmosphere that is safe and conducive to learning. Security precautions are evident. Though school health aides, school social workers and school counselors are a rare commodity, resourceful principals assure that students have access to basic health and dental care and incorporate community services to provide counseling support. They are aggressive in providing nutritional breakfasts and lunches to all eligible children.

- *Strong early childhood education programs.* Although some schools house pre-school or even parent infant programs, most schools do not. They do, however, work closely with child care, pre-school providers and parents of pre-school students to make sure that students come to kindergarten with reading readiness skills and age appropriate behaviors.

These findings need to inform policy at the school, district and state level. Too often, however, research does not drive policy because policy-makers such as legislators, state and federal education officials, and local school board members cannot "put a face" on the problem or the solution. The following vignettes precede the policy recommendations because they illustrate what these findings look like in real schools and elucidate the impact they have on students.

## A Dozen Vignettes

### Dynamic Building Leadership in Jacksonville

"She is one dynamic leader," commented Superintendent Basden when asked about Franklin School's principal, Cynthia Hurst. That she is. Faced with obstacles that would crush the ordinary principal—a low-income population of 60%, a 40% mobility rate, an "aging, decrepit WPA building with a mold problem"—Principal Hurst has prevailed, her students have excelled and her staff remains intact. Perhaps it was her training as a teacher of "behavior disordered' children; perhaps it is her voracious professional reading habit; perhaps its because she is a parent herself; perhaps it is her remarkable resourcefulness—whatever the explanation, she has effected incredible changes. For the past five years, her school has operated as a true team. As a group, her faculty seizes the latest innovative ideas and the latest research, studies them and either implements them quickly or dismisses them and moves ahead. They read books together, and they have decided to abandon "hit or miss" individual staff development in favor of participating in common professional development training. She even shares test proctoring duties with her teachers. Her staff respects her work ethic and her knowledge of current research, proven strategies and the latest information for school improvement. "She knows every book you can get an idea out of and gets all kinds of free stuff from the sales representative," cited one staff member. Teachers go the extra mile for her because she is open and they can trust her. She uses sincere praise and plenty of reinforcement. Teachers are encouraged to vent, but they all share a profound pride and active advocacy for their "no excuses philosophy." The results? Franklin School has improved their ISAT score every year the last three years, and last year more than 70% of the students met state standards.

### Healthy Kids in Belleville

A low-income community bordering East St. Louis and Cahokia, Belleville has a remarkable record of both achievement and improvement. With ISAT scores competitive with wealthy Chicago suburbs, two schools were on the HP/HP list. These schools were quick to acknowledge unwavering district leadership in looking after the welfare of students. "Health for Kids" consists of two district vans that literally ferry students to physicals, immunizations, dental, doctor, and eye appointments. At Franklin, the principal conducts a health fair through Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville to immunize pre-schoolers, and the Bright Smiles dental program ensures that every child sees a dentist at least once a year. It is a district philosophy and a clear commitment to take care of the child's basic needs—food, clothing, shelter—*first* so learning can then flourish. And flourish it does as evidenced by Franklin and Jefferson schools where 88% of the students met state standards in 2001!

Assessment Data Drives Teaching and Learning at Green Bay

In the last decade, North Chicago District 187 has gone from the verge of bankruptcy and abject failure to a shining star of the collar counties. With two schools in the HP/HP group—one for absolute performance and one for improvement--and more on the way, the district is a model of exemplary practices, learning centered leadership, extraordinary commitment and incredible hard work. Among all schools in the sample, Green Bay stands out as a model for the use of multiple measures of assessment. In addition to reviewing state and local test data, teachers use Structured Team Routines charts to identify students having difficulties in reading and math and then figuring out a way to help them. Teachers submit reading and math skill charts. Likewise, the accelerated reader program is charted school wide. Teachers are given common planning time to analyze the data and adjust the curriculum and instruction accordingly. The School Improvement Plan is a "living document." It not only sets the direction of the building, but it is used to assess progress. SIP teams meet twice a month to review the document. Data is also used to reward students! Regular "Positive Action Assemblies" are held to recognize students for academic personal bests and perfect attendance. Finally, Green Bay also assesses their own performance through teacher and community needs assessment surveys.

Extended Learning at John Jay

The principal describes John Jay Elementary as a "well loved school." One reason it is well loved is because of the staff the principal has recruited who believe that they have a "moral mission" to help all children learn. Faced with the challenges of a large population of English language learners, the principal has made family involvement and literacy a top priority. Every child has an extended day program of at least 45 minutes one day per week for parents and students together. Each grade level has a separate theme such as "We Love America" for second grade and "Government Explorers" for third grade. One day each week students participate in theme based educational activities; family activities are held every two to three weeks and parents and kids take field trips together. In addition, the Library Media Center holds weekly "Learn with Me" programs for parents and children to share books. John Jay's "well loved" principal is retiring this year, but he leaves a legacy of achievement—an average of nearly 70% of students met state standards the past three years.

Courageous District Leadership for Instructional Improvement in Centralia

Faced with the challenges of neighborhood schools that served different clientele, had far different achievement, and had teachers who seldom communicated among schools, the superintendent determined to reorganize the school district. "There were too many sides of town," he remarked. Despite some staunch objections, he created a full-day kindergarten and realigned the neighborhood schools to attendance centers. Early

literacy became the mission of the full day kindergarten. Jordan, serving grades one through three, and Irving, the fourth grade center, each developed five year school improvement plans that focused on instruction. Each grade level team worked together to match instruction to students' needs. The superintendent and principal worked collaboratively with teachers to obtain quality school wide inservice training. He hired an assistant superintendent for instruction and brought in people that knew instruction to assure that all staff heard the same message and worked together to improve. With a focus on instruction and collaborative planning, buy-in was guaranteed. "We are always improving," became sources of pride and the results speak for themselves in terms of absolute scores and improvement. A risk-taker, the superintendent demonstrated that courageous leadership could succeed. His reorganization plan dramatically improved student achievement, reduced mobility, created a culture of school improvement and made the Centralia system one of the finest in the state. Two of the schools had an average of more than 70% of the students meeting state standards the past two years.

Community Involvement Counts at Franklin

At Franklin School, the principal and teachers do not wait for parents to come to Open House, they go to the parents—during the summer! Well before the first day of school, each teacher walks the neighborhood and hand delivers an invitation to parent orientation and Open House. Unlike most districts, where these events are held after school begins, at Franklin, parent meetings are held before school! The teachers make their expectations that all children can and will succeed very clear. They also tell the parents directly what they expect from them and what the children need from them in order to succeed. Parent contact continues throughout the school year and culminates in a celebration picnic at the end of the year. One Franklin teacher fondly recalls these traditions as she described how she attended the Franklin picnic as a student many, many years ago and this year was attending her last before she retired from a career spanning more than three decades.

In addition, Franklin relies on the neighborhood association to run summer school. Because the students do so well, they are not eligible for Summer Bridges funding. Working with various community grants and an avid director, who is a retired phone company executive, the administration has ensured that all students have an active summer of learning and exploration. Struggling students are tutored every morning and the afternoon is filled with a host of activities ranging from art projects to athletics. One or two trips each week are a favorite of students, and they return to school each fall ready to learn.

Learning does not take place just in a classroom and just during the regular school day and school year. Franklin's community outreach and successful summer school were in part responsible for having it be one of the three schools to make the HP/HP list in terms of both absolute performance and improvement. During the last three years, an average of 82% of the students met state standards, and they improved by more than five percentage points each year on the ISAT.

Posen Style Professional Development

Finding a link between professional development and student achievement has been an elusive task at many schools. In most schools, teachers are responsible for their own ongoing development and pursue workshops, graduate classes, conferences and the like. Although these may be valuable activities, little evidence exists that shows an impact on student learning. Professional development is different at Posen and the impact on student learning is phenomenal. The district has made Early Literacy a top priority. To insure that all students have the same opportunities to learn and that there is continuity from class to class and grade to grade, all teachers have been taught to use the Four Block Reading Model and Power Writing. Every teacher at one school had staff development in Guided Reading. Dr. Sizemore was brought in to teach all teachers about ten structural routines. In addition, the district developed a partnership with Governor's State University to deliver ongoing mentoring for teachers in the district who received their certificate through an alternative route program. Teachers and administrators are proud of the improvement of their schools and attribute much of it to applying what they have learned as a team. The team approach has fostered many other side benefits and created a culture of an extended family. Fifteen of them—the SIP team--even spend several Saturdays together working on the school improvement plan! Posen-Robbins is in one of the most impoverished areas of the state, yet two schools in this tiny district are in the sample for improvement and for having at least two out of every three children meet state standards in 2001.

Parent Learning = Student Learning at Ziebell

Ziebell's principal was quick to realize that most of her students' parents had not had positive experiences with school when they were children and that a high percentage were English language learners or had minimal literacy skills. She determined to make her school a special place for both parents and children. To do this, the principal focused on teaching parents about school and their role in supporting their children as well as assisting the parents' own efforts to become better readers. With hard work, she was able to obtain a grant for two parent coordinators. These individuals run parent workshops throughout the year at school. The workshops all have a "make and take" activity based with plenty of socializing and fun along with a message about helping their students learn. The coordinators strive to make school a parent friendly place and teach them how to interact with teachers. Hispanic parents learn what American schools are like and what their role in the school is. In addition the coordinators conduct a formal parent survey at the beginning and end of every year. The information from the survey is shared with the school improvement team and used both to measure success and set the agenda for the forthcoming year's activities.

Parents are welcomed to school for several assemblies, and at the required report card day, they leave school with the report card and a bag of treats. The homework policy programs assure daily home school communication. Parents get a home link folder every

day. At the beginning of the year they also sign a parent compact stating what they will do for their kids.

To support parent literacy, the principal developed a parent lending library that is open every Friday. Parents can check out books and tapes. With the assistance of a Follet Foundation grant, she obtained books for adult learners, complete with comprehension and vocabulary exercises. As a recipient of a significant Case Foundation grant and with the financial support of the Illinois State Board of Education, they have Power UP Computer labs that are open for students and parents to work on reading activities for three hours after school each day. Parent involvement certainly played a role in making Ziebell the "most improved" school of all high poverty schools, gaining nearly thirty-six percentage points on the ISAT the last three years!

Power of Partnerships in Mattoon

With two of the Mattoon School District's sites in the Golden Spike group, it is clear that they have identified what works. Humboldt School forged a partnership with Eastern Illinois University (EIU) to deliver professional development courses for the entire staff and assist with curriculum evaluation, development and delivery. Moreover, this professional development is tied directly to the student improvement plan, which in turn is based on the teacher analysis of state and local assessment data. With EIU's support, then, both curriculum and instruction are based on student's learning needs and are school based, rather than teacher or even grade level based. Coupled with hard work, strong leadership and aggressive teacher recruitment, Humboldt School leads all low income schools with a three year average of more than 86% of students meeting or exceeding grade level standards.

Whittier School is Whittier Family

Staff meetings at Whittier School in Peoria are held in the library, but they should probably be held around a kitchen table because the adults are one big family. Though a mix of new teachers and veterans, the cohesiveness and calling of the collective group is striking. Every teacher believes that every child can learn despite the disadvantages. Special education teachers work hand-in-hand with the classroom teachers to ensure that all children get the type of instruction and extra support they need. Custodians, support staff, parent volunteers are all included in the school community and all are committed to doing whatever it takes to support students. The staff emphasized communication among one another and with parents. They also credited strong relationships that each teacher has with each child as a critical factor in their success. The "family" can be proud of their children, as 67% have met state standards the last three years.

Literacy Prevails in Anna

Every school in the sample focused on literacy. Some had successful Reading Recovery programs, the majority used Four Block, and Accelerated Reader was prevalent in several of the schools. In Anna they use all three! Though the principal splits his time between two schools, when he leaves Davie Elementary to travel across town, he is assured that reading is happening. Reading Recovery has enabled struggling readers to become grade level readers and maintain these skills throughout their schooling. Students previously "eligible" for retention or special education now meet state standards. Four Block Reading has dramatically improved both reading and writing by guaranteeing that writing did not "fall off the back" if time ran out. Every day students spend in the entire morning in guided reading, self-directed reading, working with words and writing. The Accelerated Reader program has succeeded in promoting independent reading. Students choose from a variety of books geared to their level. After reading them and passing a short comprehension test, they receive points towards awards and recognition. It is motivational, fun, and exciting for children. It also works as the last three years an average of 78.3% of the students met state standards.

Safety and Security at Chicago's Earhart

Many of the HP/HP schools had "character education" plans, and it was not uncommon to see evidence of these traits—responsibility, kindness, honesty, etc.--displayed in the halls on posters and even literally as "Pillars of Excellence." Understanding the importance of these, Principal Walsh emphasizes, "discipline, love and encouragement." (Tribune) The school operates on an orderly routine with clear expectations shared with students and parents. The entire staff, including security guards, support personnel and volunteers, ensure that every child behaves appropriately and even uses correct grammar. The principal is highly visible to students and staff, and she makes her expectations for discipline and order clear. She seldom misses making her morning rounds, stopping by every classroom. Do order, discipline and character make a difference? During the past three years, an average of 79% of Earhart students met state standards.

## Policy Recommendations

In 1988, the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois Board of Higher Education issued a joint report on minority student achievement, "Our Future at Risk." At that time, they enumerated several recommendations, most of which appear to have been neglected or ignored. Most are still pertinent today because the situation for low-income minority children has not improved. Nearly fifteen years later, we find ourselves with better measurement instruments and a plethora of research tools that tell us the same news: the achievement gap is real, and its impact on hundreds of thousands of lives is staggering. Nearly fifteen years later, hands are wringing and heads are shaking over the problem, initiatives have come and gone, grants have waxed and waned, and funding has ebbed and flowed; yet the problem remains.

As many previous studies have done, this report illustrates the depth of the problem. In addition, though, it shows how a handful of individual schools serving predominantly low-income families have succeeded in helping two out of every three children attain the Illinois Learning Standards, and how they have sustained and improved their record of success over time. Together, these schools hold immense promise as models for change to the extent their commonalities can be replicated. Recall that these are:

- Strong leadership advocating high learning standards and expectations for all;
- An emphasis on early literacy and intervention services for struggling readers;
- Exceptional teachers;
- More academic learning time;
- Extensive parental involvement;
- Regular use of data to drive instructional decisions;
- An internal capacity for accountability;
- High quality, school-based professional development;
- Ready access to early childhood education programs; and
- Attention to health and safety needs of students.

Replicating these will not happen without concerted state leadership and significant changes in public policy. Specifically, five policy recommendations are immediate and imperative:

1. Make the achievement of students from low-income families the top educational priority in Illinois.
2. Increase funding for prevention of reading problems and early intervention for low-income children.
3. Reallocate and reform educational funding in Illinois to assure that schools educating a high number of high poverty students have adequate and equitable resources to implement successful parent engagement and family literacy programs, to extend academic learning time, and to operate beyond the normal school day and to educate students longer than the current school year.

4. Deliver specific team training for all staff members, for all school and district administrators and for all Board members who work in high poverty schools.
5. Expand school food service, community health access and parent education at school.

***These policy recommendations are based on what successful high performing, high poverty Golden Spike schools can teach us. As policy recommendations, they are necessary—though not sufficient--steps for closing the achievement gap because no matter what policies are passed, what laws are enacted and what best practices are replicated, it is the teachers and principals working with individual children and their families who ultimately make the difference. These policy recommendations will, however, support these educators in their endeavor. Implementing them is an essential first step for the Governor, the state legislature and the State Board of Education.***

**Policy Recommendation One: Make the achievement of students from low-income families the top educational priority.** This recommendation is an extension of the 1988 Joint Committee's call to "make minority student achievement a priority in Illinois." The evidence is clear and compelling: the majority of boys and girls from low-income families are not meeting state standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the elementary grades. Consequently, they face struggles throughout their future school careers, and unless they successfully participate in remedial programs, they will have limited choices for education after high school. Most will likely face a life of fewer opportunities. *The current education system is perpetuating an underclass of citizens and creating a need for expensive and extensive remedial programs in upper grades and community colleges.* This underclass is primarily minority. Census data show that members of a racial or ethnic minority comprise a majority of poor children; thus, the education system in our great Land of Lincoln is *de facto* stratifying boys and girls by race.

Clearly, it is time for change. The future of children from low-income families and the future economic strength and viability of Illinois is truly in peril. For the welfare of students, for the welfare of communities that need skilled, educated workers, citizens and future parents, and for the welfare of the state, the achievement gap must become **the** critical policy issue of the Governor, the General Assembly, and the education and business communities.

The Golden Spike schools show that the gap can be bridged. Their successes are ample evidence that poor children, regardless of race or ethnic group, are plenty capable and can master the Illinois Learning Standards when given the appropriate supports. The appropriate supports as detailed in the policy recommendations that follow can only make a difference if improving minority student achievement becomes the single top priority of Illinois education. Without this priority, resources and efforts will be dissipated as they are now among an array of competing priorities that may serve some children well but do not contribute to, and arguably distract from, the education of our most needy.

Though this first policy recommendation is as important as "Make minority student achievement a top priority" was in 1988, it did not become a priority then, so how will it become one now? Strong, sustained leadership from many quarters is the answer. First and foremost, the newly elected governor needs to prepare and publish plans to close the achievement gap. He must publicly and repeatedly state the critical need to tackle this problem. He must demonstrate the cost effectiveness of addressing this issue now through the educational system rather than later through the welfare and penal system. Second, the General Assembly needs to make closing the achievement gap its top legislative priority. In other words, they need to reallocate funds that promote inequities and identify new sources of funding for replicating the practices, programs and policies of the Golden Spike Schools. Third, the education agencies--The State Board of Education, Board of Higher Education and Community College Board--need to issue a joint statement making minority achievement their first priority. They need to set measurable targets, develop and implement action plans and report publicly on the progress they make. Fourth, groups who embrace education, such as the IFT, IEA, Management Alliance, LUDA, Regional Superintendent's Association, Civic Committee of the Commercial Club, Metropolitan Planning Council, Network 21, the IMA and Business Roundtable and others need to align their goals with this priority.

Finally, local districts that serve predominantly low income populations not only must—as required by federal law—report differences in achievement by racial ethnic groups and low income, but also insist that school improvement plans have specific action steps to help all students attain state standards. These districts need to use the Golden Spike schools as models of prioritizing policies, practices and programs—including all school professional development—to close the achievement gap. Emulating best practices, however, is not a guarantee of success. Above all comes understanding of the problem and high expectations and aspirations for each student. Local leaders—be they administrators, teachers or community members—will need to strengthen the capacity for building a shared vision, collective beliefs and an exceptional work ethic at each school.

Once policy makers at the state level have committed to improving achievement of children of poverty, they need to concentrate resources on the HP/LP schools and leave the other schools alone. Sprinkling rain on the desert does not make grass grow. Likewise, sprinkling scare resources among all 900 school districts does not make learning flourish—especially for those most in need. Too often, policy initiatives aim to "reform" all schools and consequently, the impact on the most needy schools is minimal at best. For example, last year the "Teacher Quality" feature series in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (Rossi, 2001) succeeded in capturing the attention of policy makers. Teachers "flunking" the basic skills and content tests became the focus of Senate hearings, and a Governor's Summit was convened to solve this problem. These sessions did not address one of the most clearly evident facts in the series, that most of the teachers who failed these tests teach poor kids. Rather than looking at the differential impact of teacher quality on minority children and in low-income schools, the hearings and summit attempted to develop broad statewide solutions to a perceived statewide problem of ill-

trained teachers. Instead, it should have focused on how to get the best teachers working with the most needy children!

Actionable recommendations from these meetings included statewide mentoring and induction programs for new teachers, loan forgiveness and even supporting National Board Teachers. These were well intended but misguided because they were too broad-based and not focused on the teachers in the low-income schools and districts. Funding proposals that equally assist the North Shore and North Lawndale schools in retaining good teachers, that pay National Board Teachers the same stipends for working in Palatine or Peoria is simply inequitable. If policy makers are serious about keeping the best teachers in the most needy schools and encouraging the best teachers to teach there, funding mentoring programs, providing loan forgiveness or other incentives and supporting National Board Teachers should be significantly weighted toward these low-income schools.

*To summarize, Policy Recommendation One requires Governor Blagojevich, legislative leaders, the Illinois State Board of Education and education leadership groups to make a bold statement--in both word and deed--that closing the achievement gap will be the top priority.* The governor will need to exert leadership to assure consensus is reached among these groups, because as we have learned from the 1988 report, nothing much will happen as long as each entity pursues its own individual agenda. Assuming that leadership groups agree to make closing the achievement gap a top priority, they must focus on service and support to these schools as outlined in the recommendations which follow.

**Policy Recommendation Two: Increase funding for prevention of reading problems and early intervention for low-income children.** In 1988, the joint panel recommended, "Provide support programs early and throughout education." In 2002, this study found that the common denominator of all HP/HP schools is that they strongly emphasize the importance of early literacy. Thus, this recommendation stands. The fact that quality early intervention programs in pre-school, in kindergarten and in first grade are far more cost effective than remedial programs or special education or grade retention is well documented in Illinois, in other states, and even in individual districts (Barnett, 1998). As Thomas and Brainbridge (2001) note, "Enacting public policy that establishes educational programs for very young children should be the major strategy for helping children achieve at higher levels and reducing the achievement gap between children of high and low socioeconomic status." More recently, No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) funding for Reading First and Early Reading First as well as the findings of the National Reading Panel indicate that the federal government has made early literacy a top priority because it works and in the long run is cost effective. They have also made it a priority because if the problems are not solved at that level, children will have a difficult time throughout school. Illinois would be well advised to learn both from its own schools and from the U.S. Department of Education's Grover Whitehurst (2001) who noted the critical importance of early literacy initiatives:

"Children who are not talked to or engaged in rich language interactions with their

parents are going to have low levels of vocabulary and conceptual development, and this will affect their later reading and academic achievement … Reading scores in the tenth grade can be predicted with surprising accuracy from knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten."

Illinois has a good start on prevention, but it will require sustained support. Governor Ryan's Universal Preschool Task Force has outlined a workable plan for parent education and high quality preschool education for all four and five year olds. Likewise, the family literacy and parent education initiatives of the Illinois Workforce Development Board and partners have shown success and their continuation is critically important. Literate parents will help make their children literate, and as we learned from the HP/HP schools, parent education and involvement have a direct and strong impact on student achievement.

Turning to intervention, recall that every Golden Spike school had an active early literacy program and successfully promoted reading both in and out of school. These schools have data—beyond the ISATs—to show that early intervention works for all students. 4-Blocks™, Reading Recovery, Accelerated Reader™, a parent lending library, Book Buddies are all examples of what schools have done to make sure that students meet or exceed state standards. There is not one "magic bullet" program, but they all share commonalities: one-to-one or small group instruction in addition to regular classroom instruction; emphasis on phonics, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary; regular assessment of progress.

*Prevention and intervention programs and services must be the first funded. Though perhaps a difficult, political "sell," Illinois leaders need to be aggressive about reallocating general revenue funds to early learning prevention and intervention programs and away from programs and services that perpetuate inequities in funding or have limited impact on student achievement.* In simple terms, prevention must prevail and intervention must be intense. What matters most is that the state's executive branch coordinate early childhood education, early literacy and early reading intervention and that the legislature fund these programs before any others, including increasing general state aid.

In addition to generating new state revenue for early literacy, Illinois must quickly position itself to take advantage of significant federal dollars through Reading First and Early Reading First. The ISBE has worked hard to finalize the Reading First Grant Proposal that could bring $38 million to high poverty schools next year. *In finalizing the NCLB proposal and in delivering the professional development piece of this proposal, ISBE needs to capitalize more fully on the broad base of talent—which is internationally respected—in Illinois. ISBE will also need to take the lead in informing and supporting districts or consortiums that would benefit from competitive Early Reading First funds.*

**Policy Recommendation Three: The Governor and legislature must reform educational funding in Illinois to assure that schools educating a high number of high poverty students have adequate and equitable resources to implement**

**successful parent engagement and family literacy programs, to extend academic learning time, and to operate beyond the normal school day and to educate students longer than the current school year.** It is not likely the public would even consider supporting tax increases for funding education just to retain the status quo. It is likely, however, that the public would consider additional taxes were they guaranteed that significant improvements could be made and that they would save money in the long run.

Golden Spike schools could be the foundation for such a guarantee. These schools provide programs, practices and services that work and that are transferable. Bringing these to scale will require significant dollars. For example, among the most successful of these practices is the provision of after school activities for most students and often for their families. Recall that John Jay School actually has after school programs for students and parents built around a theme and family field trips. The Golden Spike schools also offer—or work with the community to assure that other organizations offer—extensive summer school programs. Ironically, most HP/HP schools are not eligible for state assistance for the six week Summer Bridges program because they do too well! Administrators, teachers, and parents realize that without summer school, gains would rapidly evaporate. Consequently, they find a way to provide summer programming. Recall the vignette of Franklin School in Belleville that works with the neighborhood organization to ensure students have tutoring, trips, and cultural activities during the summer.

To be sure, funding after school programs and summer school extends the reach of state revenue. The proposals enumerated in this and the other recommendations could be realized for less than 10% of the state's eight billion dollar budget if improving the achievement of 500,000 students in high poverty schools were a top priority of our elected leaders. *Policy makers must agree to concentrate on supporting the most needy students in the most needy schools—the high poverty schools--and let "local control" take care of the other schools.* Given that about three-fourths of all schools who have fewer than half their students from low-income families have at least two-thirds of their children meeting state reading standards, they seem to be doing pretty well left to their own pursuits. The question remains, though; where can "new money" be found?

*Several possible revenue sources for high poverty, low performing schools exist—including raising the state income tax—but a few hundred million dollars can be obtained through reallocation.* For one, average daily attendance (ada) block grant programs should be reduced or eliminated. For example, providing the same dollars per pupil to buy textbooks for children in Deerfield as in Decatur does nothing to close the achievement gap. Similarly, giving the same per pupil amount in an "Educational Improvement" block grant to Kenilworth and Cairo is just lousy public policy.

As another example, the poverty grant for high poverty schools needs to be increased, and the money for schools with fewer than 20% needs to be eliminated. It is a travesty that wealthy districts receive additional dollars for having a few low-income children. These districts are quite capable of assisting these boys and girls with their own resources. Likewise, the Reading Block grant should be restructured to drive more

money to high poverty schools and less to low poverty schools. The State Board should take a leadership role in aggressively advocating a budget that shows closing the achievement gap is their first and most important priority, and the legislature needs to reallocate funds to where they are most needed and where they can get the best results.

Additional revenue could also be generated by the way the Teacher Retirement System (TRS) is supported. Currently, the first educational funding dollars, by statute, go straight to TRS. Though the system is in critical need of ongoing funding, a significant portion of the statutory obligation could be refunded by the sale of Pension Obligation Bonds. Funding the system through bonds instead of annual statutory appropriations not only frees up more money for education, it eliminates any temptation to underfund or prorate funding for TRS.

Unfortunately, reallocation and bond sales will not provide sufficient revenue to support the recommendations in this paper, much less an extended day and extended school year. With the next session of the General Assembly and a new Governor in office, the opportunity exists for generating new tax revenue and radically restructuring educational funding. Just adding more money to the system will probably not make a difference, but funding the recommendations in this proposal, including support for after school activities and summer school, will. If the public is asked to provide more money, they should be certain they are getting a substantial return on their dollars. The Golden Spike schools show that when targeted appropriately, educational funding can produce impressive results and lead to substantial improvement. The public can understand that having a longer school day and longer school year is a good use of additional tax money. Also, given that the students in the Golden Spike schools are less likely to require more extensive and expensive remediation services and/or are less likely to drop out and to become part of the justice system, the public could be convinced that money spent up front makes good economic sense. A compelling case can be made for using these Golden Spike schools as examples that show investing wisely in high poverty schools can save money in the long run.

*Though several revenue sources are available for tackling the problem of educating students from low-income families, an increase in the income tax is the only one that provides enough predictable revenue to make a real difference. As little as half a percentage point increase would generate about $1.8 billion in new revenue--more than needed for implementing the recommendations thus leaving the balance to offset property tax increases. The administration would be well advised to take the public temperature for such changes.* They would likely find broad-based support for making the funding system more equitable, for adding money to the systems for the "collective good" of helping our most needy students, and for driving new dollars to schools where they are most needed. It would not be difficult to strengthen support for a tax increase if the public were assured that all HP schools could become Golden Spike Schools in a decade or less.

To summarize, educational funding needs to be equitable and adequate. Funding reform must be tied to solving the problems of the most needy children first by bringing polices,

and practices, programs and services of Golden Spike schools to scale. Educational reform that will improve HP/LP schools can be funded through reallocation of existing resources and a modest income tax increase. For example, the success of Golden Spike schools shows that targeting new dollars for extensive after school and summer programming works. State support is needed for the high poverty schools, but state assistance–and state requirements– –for those school districts that have more local resources and acceptable levels of performance should be well below those of the HP/LP schools.

**Policy Recommendation Four: Deliver specific team training for all staff members, for all school and district administrators and for all Board members who work in high poverty schools.** The State Board of Education and the teacher preparation institutions throughout Illinois need to enlist the Golden Spike principals and teachers in designing, creating and delivering materials, training and ongoing support to the 800+ HP/LP schools. This study shows that the principals and teachers in the Golden Spike schools behave differently and embrace different beliefs than modal teachers, including those in the same district. The high expectations and aspirations for each child, solid *espirit de corps*, collective work ethic, instructional expertise, frequent use of local and state assessment data, human relations skills, and missionary zeal may be innate to some extent, but more likely may be learned. These schools work as teams—learning teams as well as teaching teams. The best baseball teams are composed of players who do not know their individual statistics, who will sacrifice their own individual at bat for a run (the group goal), and who expect to win every day. Players become leaders and hard work is emulated, not ridiculed. Aside from having a core group who can hit a 90 mph fastball, these teams are like the staff in the Golden Spike schools. Several principals mentioned that they could not have reached such heights without ongoing schoolwide training for ALL staff.

*To improve student achievement in HP/LP districts, ISBE, the regional superintendents and local districts must recast professional development in three ways: replace individual professional development with school wide professional development; increase training in the use of technology for teaching, learning and data analysis; and require and incent leadership training for principals, lead teachers, superintendents and schooi boards.*

Team Training: School Wide Professional Development. Three years ago, professional development funds were eliminated from the state budget in large part because no link could be found between these dollars and student achievement. In addition, the State Board and local districts have invested a great deal of time and effort into the system of continuing professional development (CPD), but there is no mechanism for determining its effectiveness for improving teaching and learning. The ISBE staff has succeeded in certifying providers, helping Local Professional Development Committees (LPDCs) count courses and clarify the rules and regulations, but they have not been able to tell if one CPD Unit has made a difference in student learning. LPDCs have approved

thousands of professional development plans, but again, there is no documentation on the impact individual plans make on student learning.

The Golden Spike schools, however, show that the link can and does exist. School wide training, be it in school improvement planning, literacy instruction, 4 Block™ reading, technology and the like, works. Students succeed and improve in Golden Spike schools. Extensive team training for all school leaders, teachers, aides and volunteers who work with disadvantaged children will not be prohibitively expensive. ***The resources supporting the current mandated system should be realigned to support schoolwide sustained professional development in HP/LP schools. This training should be reach at least 80% of the teachers, be tied to the school improvement plans and also include teaching EVERY teacher how to teach reading.*** Local school boards and administrators are advised to support this type professional development and drop the notion that each teacher should pursue his or her own individual interests. The State Board should assist local boards in this endeavor and use personnel from Golden Spike schools to design and deliver training. Their knowledge, skills, and capacity that they have can be and should be shared through a statewide delivery system.

Technology Training: Invest in Technology Training for both Instruction and Data Analysis and Application. An important commonality in the Golden Spike schools is the use of technology to enhance student learning and to extend learning well after the school day. Though many HP/LP schools have wired buildings and classrooms and have obtained new hardware and software, it is often not used or poorly used. In Golden Spike schools, technology is used to build the skills of beginning readers and to explore topics taught in class. Though many of the computer programs are drill type programs, they engage young children with colorful characters, interesting story lines, humor and sound. A child's access to computers appears to be less dependent on the teacher than in modal schools.

Despite Illinois' comprehensive, web-based source of data –Illinois School Improvement (http://ilsi.net)-that provides HP/LP staff with access to standards based resources, with a model school improvement planning (SIP) process, with a data driven SIP template and with comparative data that can be a start in opening dialogue with Golden Spike schools, the ISBE has no evidence of its use or impact. In the past SBE has only put minimal effort and funding toward training their own staff or the field in ILSI's use or in any kind of data analysis. Without state supported training, it is no wonder that data driven decision-making is non-existent in most schools. Administrators and teachers in many of the Golden Spike schools, however, use technology for maintaining and analyzing data. Some understand and use ILSI; others have literally never heard of it, but instead they use data from their own local assessments to drive improvements in teaching and learning. All are adept at using some system, and the results speak for themselves. In fact, at Ziebell School, teachers meet monthly to review local assessment data, and in Belleville, the administrators track student performance on state and local tests. Making instructional decisions based on data is the core of continuous improvement; thus ***SBE and local districts need to deliver ongoing training in data gathering and analysis.***

Leadership Training at All Levels. Many of the Golden Spike principals succeed because they bring incredible skills to the position. Though some are black and some are white, some are old and some are young, some are extroverts and some are introverts, they are all leaders. That is, each has created a collective vision, and each has worked collaboratively with staff and community to advance this vision and incorporate it into school improvement plans. They set a daily model for all members of the learning community. As a group, they are driven, resourceful, focused and even have a sense of humor. Most of all, they are really hard workers. They are not as much worried about clinical supervision and evaluation as they are finding ways to reach each child. As Rick DuFour distinguishes in a recent article (2002), they are "learning centered" leaders. Several superintendents and principals also cited the importance of teacher leadership. For example, there is the first grade teacher in St. Marie School in Jasper who "will not let students fail" and who succeeds in driving the 4 Block™ implementation.

In professional development for teachers, one does not find many workshops, classes or conference sessions on leadership for teachers. Teachers working in HP/LP schools would benefit greatly from leadership training that helps them learn and apply the skill set necessary to move their students, their families and other teachers in the school in a common direction. *The State Board and regional superintendents should intensify training for leaders, especially those in HP/LP schools, to teach the knowledge and skills the Golden Spike leaders possess.*

In addition to training of school leaders, ***the ISBE should work with the Illinois Association of School Administrators and Illinois Association of School Boards to develop training for superintendent and boards in districts that have a high percentage of low-income students.*** Though school boards were not the subject of this study, superintendents and principals in the Golden Spike schools frequently cited the support of their boards. Also, although some of the superintendents in the study were more actively involved in closing the achievement gap than others, they had all learned not to meddle with a fine school or productive principals and to assist the principal in any way possible. Again, the superintendents of Golden Spike schools should be an invaluable resource for designing statewide training modules that will work.

**Policy Recommendation Five: Expand school food service, community health access and parent education at school.** Mandate insurance and stronger compliance with immunization requirements. The first four policy recommendations will have at best an incremental impact if children come to school undernourished and in ill health. Learning can best occur when a child is well nourished and safe. The Child Nutrition Division of SBE conducts widespread nutrition awareness campaigns and works hard to ensure that all children are nourished. Many local districts are also aggressive in being sure students receive breakfast and lunch. Despite these efforts, a significant number of students eligible for free lunch and free breakfast do not participate. Likewise, too many students needing basic eye and dental care, not to mention children with chronic health problems, are not getting proper care. The local emergency room cannot continue to be the community health clinic as it is now for too many poor students. To be successful,

school districts that serve high poverty neighborhoods will need support from their local, county and stat health departments to attend to these needs. Golden Spike schools show that creative programs can work. Some have health centers in the building, others transport parents to health centers, and many have found that nutritious food is a powerful draw for after school and evening programs. *The Governor should immediately convene an advisory panel to prepare a detailed action plan for improving student nutrition and health in high poverty neighborhoods*

## Critical Considerations

Without sustained district, state and federal support, the policy recommendations cannot be enacted and successful practices, programs and services cannot be replicated. State leadership is especially important. Given that since 1988, little, if any, progress has been made in closing the achievement gap, it may be time for the newly elected administration to consider some structural changes in systems and governance of the state educational enterprise in order to move the policy recommendations. These changes are presented as five "Critical Considerations" for the Illinois State Board of Education and newly seated administration to discuss, to explore in more detail and to come to a decision on how to proceed.

**Critical Consideration One: To increase local districts' capacities for creating internal accountability, for using data to drive instructional decisions, and for recasting professional development as a school wide initiative, ISBE must finalize and implement an accountability system that matters to students, to schools, to districts, and to the taxpayers and provides sustained support for HP/LP schools.**

An effective accountability system needs to have the following components:

- a set of standards that are clearly communicated and understood;
- an assessment system for student, school and district performance;
- accurate reporting mechanisms for taxpayers, parents, staff and students;
- ongoing internal and external feedback and evaluation.
- incentives and rewards for demonstrated excellence and improvement;
- and stakes, i.e. sanctions and support for schools that do not enable all children to learn the standards. (Baker et al, 2002)

At the moment, there is not an accountability system in Illinois, though components of one exist. Random acts of accountability are the rule. "Random acts of accountability," like "random acts of kindness," make for nice anecdotes but do not succeed in making the world, or its schools, much better. The state's system of accountability is an ongoing "work in progress," but the progress needs to be accelerated with adoption of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). HP/LP schools will need assistance in implementing and complying with the act, and ISBE is currently hard at work to tie the pieces of it

together and ensure that the $200 plus million they will receive from the federal government goes to support schools that serve a high percentage of low-income students. ISBE, however, cannot solely rely on NCLB to be the state accountability system. In short order, ISBE needs to blend the federal components with existing state components into a coherent system.

A good use of federal funds would be to replicate the data analysis and subsequent school improvement planning of Golden Spike schools such as in North Chicago. The staff use data to drive instructional decisions and frequently and regularly monitor progress of individual students. Improvement plans are built around performance data, regular reports are made to students and parents, and the team is involved in the success of all children and the entire school.

Standards. The ISBE does have clear and rigorous standards. The fact that the standards exist, however, is not enough. They must remain intact, and ISBE needs to strengthen support for their implementation. The standards are important not only for what they are, but for what they mean to schools—high expectations and aspirations for all children in all schools. ISBE has begun to support local districts with web-based benchmarks, assessments, and other resources, and is developing training modules such as the "Standards Aligned Classroom." These efforts are beginning to bear fruit as there is evidence that local schools and districts are moving from "curriculum alignment" to actually changing instruction. In visiting HP/HP schools, it is clear that instruction is different. As noted above, teachers use a variety of resources and materials and have recast their own professional development and leadership to assure that each child succeeds. *ISBE is advised, then, to maintain the current high standards and work with Golden Spike schools to develop products and services that HP/LP schools can use to change INSTRUCTION.*

Assessment. An accountability system needs a valid testing instrument. At the present time, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) serves this function. Though recently coming under fire, the ISAT is a valid and reliable measure of the Illinois Learning Standards, and a more rigorous test than nationally normed instruments. The process used for writing questions and determining performance levels is not an exact science, but it is modeled after the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and has proven effective. The test, however, is not an annual test. NCLB requires an annual test of standards, so either an extended ISAT or another test will need to be implemented in the near future. Whatever choice is made, ***the required annual tests need to be vertically equated.*** "Vertically equated" means that identical or highly similar questions that have been thoroughly tested with pilot groups are placed in consecutive year tests. Vertically equating tests allows one to compare performance of a group from one year to the next. For example, if the ISATs were vertically equated, then when 70% of a group of third grade students met state reading standards in 1999, and 85% of that same group of students met fifth grade state reading standards in 2001, one could claim that they made significant progress during the two period. Currently, however, the tests are not vertically equated, so one cannot tell if the change in scores during the two year period is due to academic gains or just to the fact that the fifth grade test was easier (or

perhaps some combination of the two). Without vertically equated tests, one cannot validly gauge progress from one year to the next.

In any case, to meet the requirements of NCLB, the accountability system needs to be based on a single test that assesses the Illinois Learning Standards. The ISAT has done the job well thus far, but its future is in peril unless ISBE can make a clear, compelling case to policy makers and educational leaders that it is a valid, reliable, and appropriate instrument that accurately and clearly measures educational progress.

Reporting. An accountability system needs an accurate reporting mechanism. Currently, the State Report Card is the reporting instrument. Given the requirements of NCLB and the need for an accountability system, the Report Card needs revision. Changes need to begin with the reporting of the assessment data to schools. In order to report to the public in a timelier manner, such as the beginning of the school year instead of October 31, districts need to get their data back more promptly. Even more importantly, to develop and publish school improvement plans, districts need their data back before the end of the school year. *Though there are several obstacles to a quick turn-around time for test data, an accountability system will not function without quick return of data. One cannot hold schools accountable for improvement if the data come too late for them to develop plans, train teachers or make curricular changes. This problem must be solved.*

Data reporting is also hampered by lack of student identifiers. Another recommendation of the 1988 commission was to monitor programs and student progress more closely. This recommendation is as timely today as it was then, and it merits attention. Because achievement is reported as the aggregate number of students meeting or exceeding standards, the public is not able to get a completely accurate picture of how their local schools are doing. They do not know how they have done with children who have attended those schools for years compared to those who moved into the school a few months before the test. They do not know if the school is working hard with all students or is ignoring the needs of those who have already met standards or who are too far below standards to meet them in the near future. They also do not know the extent to which each child has progressed.

In many schools that this researcher visited, he heard stories of middle school students (grades five through eight) who may have made two or three year's progress in a year but did not meet state standards. Helping a child move from a second grade to a fourth grade level or a third grade to a sixth grade level in a year can be accomplished. It is a monumental task, but there is currently no way to recognize this achievement. In fact, the current accountability system, that reports aggregate data of student performance levels, is a disincentive for helping students that perform two or three years below grade level. Schools should be "credited" for helping all children achieve at least a year's progress in a year and should even get "extra credit" for those making multiple year gains, even if they cannot yet meet state standards. An accountability system can and should be able to report and recognize both aggregate and individual progress. *SBE needs to implement a system of identifying and tracking the performance of individual children.*

*Then, they should report progress both on aggregate performance and on the percentage of children who have made at least a year's progress each year.*

Other revisions to the Report Card are required by the NCLB Act. This act has specific requirements regarding the success of schools ensuring that ALL students are making annual yearly progress (AYP). Though the Report Card does a commendable job of reporting disaggregated data now, revisions for AYP reporting must proceed immediately. In addition, the Report Card needs to include feedback and evaluation information that will be useful to the public and help drive continuous improvement.

Feedback and Evaluation. Recall that Golden Spike schools excel at developing and implementing school improvement plans that are embraced by the staff and community. Research presents a far different picture in HP/LP schools. As Elmore (1998) notes, most of these schools do not have a system for internal accountability. This deficiency could be easily remedied. Currently, the State Board mandates performance agreements for low performing schools. Performance agreements are a good idea only if ISBE—or some third party—provides appropriate training in their development and implementation. The school improvement plan template on the ILSI website, which uses a question driven approach, is one that would work well since it forces the use of data and ensures accurate, meaningful reporting. As noted in the previous recommendation, training all local staff in its use would be a good investment in education. Likewise, the ISBE has already invested in the Snapshot for Early Learning (a diagnostic reading test for kindergarten and first grade children) and is an active member of the Baldrige in Education Initiative. As with ILSI, little or no training in these has been made available, however. The accountability system, then, works hand-in-hand with the previous recommendation. *For high poverty schools that are not performing or improving, the state must require mandated school-wide training tied to state standards and the school improvement plan along with published data-based performance agreements. The training must encompass all individuals—administrators and teachers, board members and aides—who work with our neediest children.*

A proposed school designation system presented to ISBE in 2001 is a firm foundation for feedback, evaluation and reporting. The recommendation was that schools be evaluated (and designated or graded) on current year performance, three-year performance, attendance rates and graduation rates. In addition, the proposed designation system included components for recognizing extraordinary results (one standard error above a predicted score) and for successful innovative programs. This designation system—which was proposed to become the first page of the State Report Card—is easily understood and gives the public a far more thorough picture of their schools than they currently have. *The State Board should act now to implement this proposed designation system, with whatever modifications are required by NCLB (such as AYP reporting), and include it on the fall, 2003 Report Card.*

Sanctions for low performing schools and schools that are declining. Despite performance agreements and training, every school may not succeed. With a prescribed performance agreement, professional development training and careful monitoring, the

state could determine in a matter of two or three years whether the low-performing schools are making adequate progress. Although NCLB provides stipends for students to leave failing schools, SBE should act more quickly and decisively to identify these schools and make changes. ***Given the success of financial oversight panels and existing powers in the state law to appoint an oversight panel for watch list schools, the SBE should act to appoint local panels to run the school districts where the performance of low-income children has stagnated or declined***. These panels would not replace locally elected boards, but they would have final approval of all Board decisions and would be expected to advise Board actions in setting policies and creating programs and services. There are currently school systems in the state that are not serving the needs of low-income minority children despite the influx of millions of dollars. It is time for decisive action.

Rewards for high performing and improving schools. *An accountability system must also provide for positive public recognition for successful schools.* Currently, the big news is the Warning List. The ISBE should not neglect these schools, but it should also proclaim, recognize and reward schools that are excelling. Simply stated, the ISBE needs to celebrate and publicize the accomplishments and achievements of the Golden Spike schools. In making the calls and visits, this researcher was struck with how many of the principals had no idea of how good they were. More than one principal or superintendent said, "How did you find out about our school?" The Watch List makes front-page news and fills press releases; high performing, high poverty schools do not even raise an eyebrow. The irony of getting more attention (and money) for low performance than high performance is not lost on the principals and superintendents of the Golden Spike schools. In fact, these schools do not qualify for state supported summer school because their performance is so good. Success, then, is a disincentive! The Golden Spike schools should continue to have summer school programs funded as they are for other high poverty schools and cash rewards should be given to the schools to use for expanding classroom libraries, technology, parent programming or other services the local district determines. *Put simply, state level policy makers and community leaders who demand that schools should be run like business ought to support the schools that are successful with distinct financial rewards. A significant cash award for schools that excel during a three year period would be an enormous incentive.*

Not all rewards and recognition need cost money. One of the greatest events of the State Board is the "Those Who Excel" banquet. At this banquet or at a separate high profile event, Golden Spike schools must be publicly recognized and lionized for their achievements.

To summarize, if the accountability system is to drive continuous improvement, schools must be given data, trained in how to use it to design and implement school improvement plans and then held accountable for the effectiveness of the plans over time. Those that improve should be formally recognized and rewarded; those that do not—despite recommended training as described above—require radical interventions.

**Critical Consideration Two: To provide the training to teacher and administrators who work in high poverty schools, the State Board needs to hire and/or organize and train staff to assist local schools and districts in closing the achievement gap.** If the State Board is serious about closing the achievement gap, and if it is serious about making it a top priority, form—in terms of staffing—needs to follow function. *This "form" must be about leadership and service, not management and compliance.* The Core Team and division leaders must lead by example; that is, by providing visionary leadership through value added service to the most needy districts. They must first be trained in what it takes to make a high poverty school a high performing one and then be both empowered and held accountable by the state board members for making a difference. In other words, they need to be as accountable for improving the performance of high poverty low performing schools, as are the personnel of these schools. Period.

With assistance from the leaders of the Golden Spike schools, the ISBE should design and implement a support system that will work. It should be built upon the foundation of practices and processes in high performing, high poverty schools and assist and aid—not punish, shame or neglect—HP/LP schools.

Despite releasing three different organizational charts in March of 2003, ISBE has yet to prove itself in terms of advancing student achievement by aligning the agency to improve the lot of low-income and minority students. Though some staff have devoted countless hours to supporting troubled schools and districts—and in many instances made a very positive impact—in the past several months, there has been minimal evidence in terms of public communications, budget recommendations, goal reporting or policy initiatives indicating that the leadership team has made closing the achievement gap a top priority. ISBE must organize and deploy staff to solve this problem. It currently requires HP/LP districts to submit a Performance Agreement—a plan for change. As noted earlier, real change requires more than a plan, it requires an internal capacity. ISBE does not have a plan for hiring or outsourcing personnel to provide the training and sustained support to build this essential internal capacity for accountability and teach the knowledge and skills necessary for HP/LP schools to change. No matter how good a Performance Agreement is, paper alone will simply not make much difference.

The State Board of Education has the opportunity to tackle the achievement gap. They have a new superintendent, they currently employ some skilled individuals, they have leaders trained in Baldrige, they have talented researchers and they employ people who care about making a difference in the most needy schools. In past years, ISBE staff work has made a positive difference in some HP/LP schools. In addition, ISBE showed that it can successfully implement innovative ideas, bring quality programs, best practices and valuable services to scale, as demonstrated by the International Reading Association's recent recognition of Illinois as the only "five star" state. The State Board has not, however, sharpened their focus to support districts efforts to close the achievement gap--the single most important issue facing Illinois education. It is time to get to it. *ISBE must provide more direct staff assistance to HP/LP schools and become a more active leader and advocate for improving achievement in these schools.*

**Critical Consideration Three: To insure parent engagement and that children's health, safety and security needs are addressed, the State Board of Education must pursue partnerships with the Department of Public Health, Department of Human Services and local districts to assist parents in parenting.** As with health issues, parenting can play a strong role in closing the achievement gap. Parent education and student education are inexorably intertwined. This study has shown that the most successful schools work closely with parents and strive to educate them. Efforts to assist parents become literate, efforts to create home school relationships, efforts to teach parents how to nurture and teach infants and toddlers and efforts to strengthen parent/child bonds can have a long term impact. Golden Spike schools successfully engage students' parents. They find ways to get parents into schools, to make their expectations clear, to communicate face-to-face, to make home visits, to make school a welcoming place for parents with a history of bad experiences with school, to help parents learn to read better, to assist them in taking care of children's health problems, to celebrate success with students, and even to teach them how to read to students and how to monitor television. They do this while respecting their role and dignity. We hear complaints of how schools have taken over parent's roles, yet this has not happened in Golden Spike schools. They do not want to be parents any more than any other school does, so they educate them. They realize that effective parenting is not an innate characteristic, but a learned skill. They understand that the enormous stress of poverty creates impediments that are unimaginable to those in more comfortable surroundings and help parents help their kids. *Because the Golden Spike schools have developed their own model programs, these schools can and should serve as resources for regional superintendents, county boards and the state education agencies to help parents learn to parent in the face of overwhelming obstacles.*

Golden Spike schools show that parenting education, family literacy, workforce literacy and workplace literacy go hand-in-hand with student literacy. The current structure and responsibilities of ISBE does not reflect this relationship. Integrating these programs with early literacy is essential to closing the achievement gap, but it is unlikely to happen with the controlling agencies left to their own devices. Critical Consideration Four, below, contains suggestions to eliminate the current fragmentation of services and priorities.

**Critical Consideration Four: To assure a seamless system of education beginning in the preschool years, to assure that higher education trains teachers and principals to work with children of poverty and to assure the most efficient distribution of resources, Governor Blagojevich and the General Assembly should explore replacing the State Board of Education, Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and Community College Board (ICCB) with a single Board of Education. This new Board should also be responsible for all early learning and early childhood programs.** Although all three boards are effective in their own right and have made progress on their own separate agendas, improving minority achievement requires the concerted effort of all three boards as well as all parties concerned with early childhood

education. Given a long history of the fragmentation of interests, competing priorities and uneven "regard" from the Executive Branch, it is unlikely that the three boards will work together to close the achievement gap. One Board, however, could make it a top priority and truly align policies, programs and services from preschool through graduate school.

For example, from the perspective of higher education, it is clear that the principals and teachers in high poverty schools need special training and long term mentoring support that a university can provide. It is clear that community colleges could be an extraordinary source of ongoing professional development and the preparation of future minority teachers. It is clear that both higher education boards have significant economic interests in reducing the number of remedial courses they offer, yet both are powerless to effect changes in the PK-12 system that sends them most of their students and most of Illinois' future teachers.

From the PK-12 perspective, the State Board of Education knows that teacher education institutions need to produce fewer elementary school teachers who want to work in the suburbs and train and place a lot more teachers and principals in high poverty schools. ISBE knows that community colleges need to aggressively recruit and begin preparing minority teachers, that both IBHE and ICCB need to create incentives for teachers and principals to work in these schools and that higher education must take an active role in the improvement of these schools, yet they with the exception of leveling some sanctions on teacher preparation institutions, they powerless to impact policy and practices in higher education.

Looking at the recent history, one finds that additional examples abound. Though the three boards currently have a positive working relationship, they have not been able to develop a common agenda and align priorities, budgets or legislative agendas. In fact, despite the unprecedented cooperation, the past three years still saw too many counterproductive turf wars including the "rights" to Adult Education, who "controls" Family Literacy and where "Even Start"money should go. Both the ISBE and ICCB made strong cases for where these should fit best, but the argument wasted time, energy and resources (financial and human). Adult education and family literacy are essential components of any comprehensive strategy for closing the Achievement Gap, and Even Start is one federal program that has worked in helping parents help their children have the requisite skills they need to begin kindergarten. With one Board of Education, the incessant tug-of-wars, and inevitable fall-out in terms of perceived favor with the Governor and employment of staff would not be a distraction. The single Board could assure that the services were delivered effectively from preschool through graduate school and that teachers were being prepared and rewarded for teaching the most needy children.

Also, a single Board could allocate funds far more effectively. The longstanding practice of allocating two-thirds of available education funding to K-12, and one-third to higher education does not reflect where state dollars can have the most impact on education.

No one argues that "Learning Begins at Birth" is not true and that prevention is more effective and less costly than remediation, that effective early childhood education can close the achievement gap, and that PK-16 educational system must be aligned, but early learning is currently housed in programs at both the State Board of Education and Department of Human Services. Though the Governor's Task Force for Universal Pre-School should be commended for attempting to address this problem by naming a coordinating council, it is not likely that another body without any authority can coordinate the efforts of two diverse bureaucracies. Early learning needs to be brought under one roof, and that roof should be the one that houses PK-20 education.

As a single Board, the new Board of Education needs to become a viable part of the Governor's cabinet. The Golden Spike schools teach us that family services and addressing health and nutrition needs are of critical importance to closing the achievement gap. Unless the Board of Education sits at the table with the DPH, DHS, DCFS and the Governor, and unless public policy to address the achievement gap involves all groups, even the most well intended initiatives will be incrementally effective at best.

**Critical Consideration Five: To assure that the state budget allocates resources in the most effective manner and that policies and legislation accomplish desired ends, the Governor and State Board of Education need to develop and implement an ongoing research agenda and use results to inform state and local policies and funding allocation decisions.** One reason that the achievement gap and minority education have not received the attention recommended by the 1988 panel is because there was no continual study to provide data for policy and budget decisions and no ongoing commission or group to provide concrete policy recommendations. This study has provided a fresh perspective, and the Golden Spike schools have provided several promising solutions to the problem, which have been incorporated into the above recommendations. There are still, however, several important research questions that remain unanswered:

- What exactly are the knowledge, skills, disposition and beliefs that individual teachers and principals in high poverty schools need to have to assure student success and how can these personnel acquire them?

- What organizational values and beliefs do HP/LP schools need to acquire, and how can systemic, ongoing training be delivered to assure these are institutionalized?

- What can be done to stabilize neighborhoods thus reducing student mobility rate?

- How should parent education and family literacy be delivered to maximize student literacy?

- What is the impact of school wide professional development as opposed to individual professional development on student learning?

- How does the district administration support the school improvement process and the leadership and staff of HP/HP schools?

- What is the adequate cost for educating children in high poverty schools? How does this vary by region and how does this vary by the percentage of low-income children in school?

- What is the actual cost of educating students who are not reading at the end of third grade in special education and remedial programs, and how does this amount compare to the cost of providing appropriate prevention programs?

- What is the cost to higher education for "passing on" students not prepared for the reading and mathematical rigors of college? What is the cost to employers of ill-prepared students?

- What are the effects of improved literacy on crime rates and incarceration?

- What is the annual cost to taxpayers to provide social services to dropouts?

- What will be the impact on the workforce if approximately two-thirds of low-income students continue to be unable to meet state standards upon graduation from high school?

- How much in terms of additional taxes would the public be willing to pay to make all high poverty schools high performing schools by replicating policies, programs, practices and services from Golden Spike schools?

Answering these questions will provide decision makers at all levels of the educational system, from the Governor's office to the classroom, with critically important information.

## Conclusion

The single most critical problem facing Illinois public education and continued economic development is the persistence of a pernicious achievement gap. This gap is the documented difference between the academic achievement of students from middle and upper class families and their peers from low-income families. At all grades, and in every subject tested, the chasm between these groups is enormous. The achievement gap is important because it has "lifetime consequences, limiting opportunities for minority students in higher education, employment, and earnings." (Pollock, 2001)

A group of high poverty high performing Illinois schools have demonstrated that the gap can be closed and that the education of poor children can be improved. These schools share many common characteristics including:

- Having exemplary principals who are leaders of learning, who are resourceful, who craft a culture of high standards and high expectations, and who model leadership daily
- Employing a hard working devoted staff that has the highest expectations and demand excellence
- Implementing policies, programs and services to include parents in the school and educate parents in both parenting and in academic skills
- Providing access to good nutrition and health care, and ensuring schools are safe and secure
- Funding school wide professional development on a single topic related to school improvement planning
- Sharing of local and state assessment data and use of that data to improve teaching and learning
- Holding frequent celebrations and ceremonies
- Having strong connection to early childhood programs
- Making early literacy practices and programs that focus on prevention and early intervention and include access to books in the classroom and formal recognition of reading progress a top priority
- Providing ready access to a host of after school, before school, and Saturday programs
- Ensuring summer school for most students
- Using technology to enhance learning and as a tool for analyzing and charting data
- Focusing school improvement plans on a small number of improvement initiatives that are embraced, supported and sustained by the entire school community

It is long past time to learn from these schools and to make the secrets of success far less secretive and far more accessible to all communities that educate poor students. The five recommendations need to top the agenda of Governor Blagojevich, the new General Assembly and state education agencies. The five considerations require their attention.

Local districts and schools who educate a large number of high poverty students can also act on appropriate recommendations and are also encouraged to pursue their own dialogue with the Golden Spike schools as they strive to emulate their success. In the end it will be these schools in these districts that make a difference. We must make their success a statewide priority and work as a team to ensure that each and every child meets or exceeds the Illinois Learning Standards.

Recalling Whitehurst's search for a main effect in Golden Spike schools, this research shows that there is not just one. Expending great sums of money on teacher training alone will not help any more than assuring that all children are well fed and healthy; they need both and they need more. A complex combination of conditions for success is required. Clearly the quality and commitment of school leaders and the teachers matter a great deal. Community involvement and extended learning opportunities are essential as are school safety and security. An internal accountability based on data driven decisions is most likely a necessary condition, and early literacy programs are a must. Quality early childhood education, after school activities and summer school are also important and necessary, though not sufficient. High standards and quality instruction count for a lot. In short, there is no "main effect" this researcher could identify, but there is a very clear lesson in what it will take to enable HP/LP schools to become Golden Spike schools.

In closing, the Golden Spike schools teach us an important lesson in leadership, hard work and teamwork, a lesson first learned long ago when America spanned a physical, though equally harrowing gap of uniting the East and West in the 1860s. Writes historian Stephen Ambrose (2000, p. 17), "Next to winning the Civil War and abolishing slavery, building the first transcontinental railroad was the greatest achievement of the American People in the 19the century … It took brains, muscles and sweat in quantities and scope never before put into a single project … Most of all, it could not have been done without teamwork." To paraphrase Ambrose, closing the achievement gap in schools across our great state will require leaders' brains, legislative and fiscal muscle and the sweat of educators and parents in quantities and scope never before put into a single project; most of all it cannot be done without teamwork. For Victor's sake, let's get to it!

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## High Poverty High Performing Elementary Schools

Map prepared by The Center For Governmental Studies, NIU
05/08/02

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## GOLDEN SPIKE SCHOOLS 2001

| School | District | Town |
|---|---|---|
| HUMBOLDT ELEM SCHOOL | MATTOON C U SCHOOL DIST 2 | HUMBOLDT |
| GEORGE WASHINGTON ELEM SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| EARHART ELEM OPT FOR KNOWL SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| STE MARIE ELEM SCHOOL | JASPER COUNTY COMM UNIT DIST 1 | SAINTE MARIE |
| MAPLE GROVE ELEM SCHOOL | JOPPA-MAPLE GROVE UNIT DIST 38 | METROPOLIS |
| FRANKLIN ELEM SCHOOL | BELLEVILLE SCHOOL DIST 118 | BELLEVILLE |
| MOUNT ERIE ELEM SCHOOL | NORTH WAYNE C U SCHOOL DIST 200 | MOUNT ERIE |
| GREEN BAY ELEM SCHOOL | NORTH CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 187 | NORTH CHICAGO |
| WILDWOOD ELEM SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| IRVING ELEM SCHOOL | CENTRALIA SCHOOL DIST 135 | CENTRALIA |
| ZEIGLER-ROYALTON JR HIGH SCHOOL | ZEIGLER-ROYALTON C U S DIST 188 | ZEIGLER |
| JOHN JAY ELEM SCHOOL | COMM CONS SCH DIST 59 | MOUNT PROSPECT |
| NIELSON SCHOOL | GALESBURG C U SCHOOL DIST 205 | GALESBURG |
| KENWOOD ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| GALLATIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | GALLATIN C U SCHOOL DISTRICT 7 | JUNCTION |
| UNITY POINT ELEM SCHOOL | UNITY POINT C C SCHOOL DIST 140 | CARBONDALE |
| LOGAN ELEM SCHOOL | MURPHYSBORO C U SCH DIST 186 | MURPHYSBORO |
| NEW HOLLAND-MIDDLETOWN ELEM SCHL | NEW HOLLAND-MIDDLETOWN E DIST 88 | MIDDLETOWN |
| JEFFERSON ELEM SCHOOL | BELLEVILLE SCHOOL DIST 118 | BELLEVILLE |
| DAVIE ELEM SCHOOL | ANNA C C SCH DIST 37 | ANNA |
| MEMORIAL ELEM SCHOOL | TAYLORVILLE C U SCH DIST 3 | TAYLORVILLE |
| SOLOMON ELEM SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| JE-NEIR ELEM SCHOOL | MOMENCE COMM UNIT SCH DIST 1 | MOMENCE |
| GEORGE WASHINGTON ELEM SCHOOL | MOLINE UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 40 | MOLINE |
| VICTORIA ELEM SCHOOL | R O W V A COMM UNIT SCH DIST 208 | VICTORIA |
| CREAL SPRINGS ELEM SCHOOL | MARION COMM UNIT SCH DIST 2 | CREAL SPRINGS |
| JORDAN ELEM SCHOOL | CENTRALIA SCHOOL DIST 135 | CENTRALIA |
| WASHINGTON ELEM SCHOOL | MATTOON C U SCHOOL DIST 2 | MATTOON |
| ZEIGLER-ROYALTON ELEM SCHOOL | ZEIGLER-ROYALTON C U S DIST 188 | ZEIGLER |
| LINCOLN ELEM SCHOOL | MOUNT VERNON SCHOOL DIST 80 | MOUNT VERNON |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| FRANKLIN ELEM SCHOOL | JACKSONVILLE SCHOOL DIST 117 | JACKSONVILLE |
| NORTHVIEW ELEM SCHOOL | RANTOUL CITY SCHOOL DIST 137 | RANTOUL |
| VANCE ELEM SCHOOL | PARIS-UNION SCHOOL DIST 95 | PARIS |
| IRVINGTON ELEM SCHOOL | IRVINGTON C C SCH DISTRICT 11 | IRVINGTON |
| SOUTHEASTERN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | SOUTHEASTERN C U SCH DIST 337 | PLYMOUTH |
| HERRIN C U S D 4 ELEM SCHOOL | HERRIN C U SCH DIST 4 | HERRIN |
| WHITTIER PRIMARY SCHOOL | PEORIA SCHOOL DISTRICT 150 | PEORIA |
| ROSSVILLE-ALVIN ELEM SCHOOL | ROSSVILLE-ALVIN CU SCH DIST 7 | ROSSVILLE |
| JOHN F KENNEDY ELEM SCHOOL | SCHILLER PARK SCHOOL DIST 81 | SCHILLER PARK |
| KING SCHOOL | GALESBURG C U SCHOOL DIST 205 | GALESBURG |
| | | |
| DEWEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | QUINCY SCHOOL DISTRICT 172 | QUINCY |
| CHILDS ELEM SCHOOL | POSEN-ROBBINS EL SCH DIST 143-5 | ROBBINS |
| ZIEBELL ELEM SCHOOL | POSEN-ROBBINS EL SCH DIST 143-5 | POSEN |
| SULLIVAN HIGH SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| BLAINE ELEM SCHOOL | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| STONE ELEM SCHOLASTIC ACADEMY | CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 299 | CHICAGO |
| WILLOW HILL ELEM SCHOOL | JASPER COUNTY COMM UNIT DIST 1 | WILLOW HILL |
| LINCOLN CLTRL CTR-MONTESSORI ELEM | KANKAKEE SCHOOL DIST 111 | KANKAKEE |
| METROPOLIS MIDDLE SCHOOL | MASSAC UNIT DISTRICT #1 | METROPOLIS |
| FRANKLIN ELEM SCHOOL | BELLEVILLE SCHOOL DIST 118 | BELLEVILLE |
| EDGEMONT ELEM SCHOOL | EAST ST LOUIS SCHOOL DIST 189 | EAST SAINT LOUIS |
| LAKETOWN ELEM SCHOOL | SPRINGFIELD SCHOOL DISTRICT 186 | SPRINGFIELD |
| MOUNT ERIE ELEM SCHOOL | NORTH WAYNE C U SCHOOL DIST 200 | MOUNT ERIE |
| DILLON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | ROCK FALLS ELEMENTARY SCH DIST 13 | ROCK FALLS |
| | | |
| LINCOLN ELEM SCHOOL | PANA COMM UNIT SCHOOL DIST 8 | PANA |
| SOUTH FORK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | SOUTH FORK SCHOOL DISTRICT 14 | KINCAID |
| REDMON ELEM SCHOOL | PARIS-UNION SCHOOL DIST 95 | PARIS |
| LOGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL | LOGAN COMM CONS SCH DIST 110 | LOGAN |
| FORRESTAL ELEM SCHOOL | NORTH CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST 187 | GREAT LAKES |
| WASHINGTON-MONROE ELEM SCHOOL | LINCOLN ELEM SCHOOL DIST 27 | LINCOLN |
| NEW HOLLAND-MIDDLETOWN ELEM SCHL | NEW HOLLAND-MIDDLETOWN E DIST 88 | MIDDLETOWN |
| WILLARD ELEM SCHOOL | MOLINE UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 40 | MOLINE |

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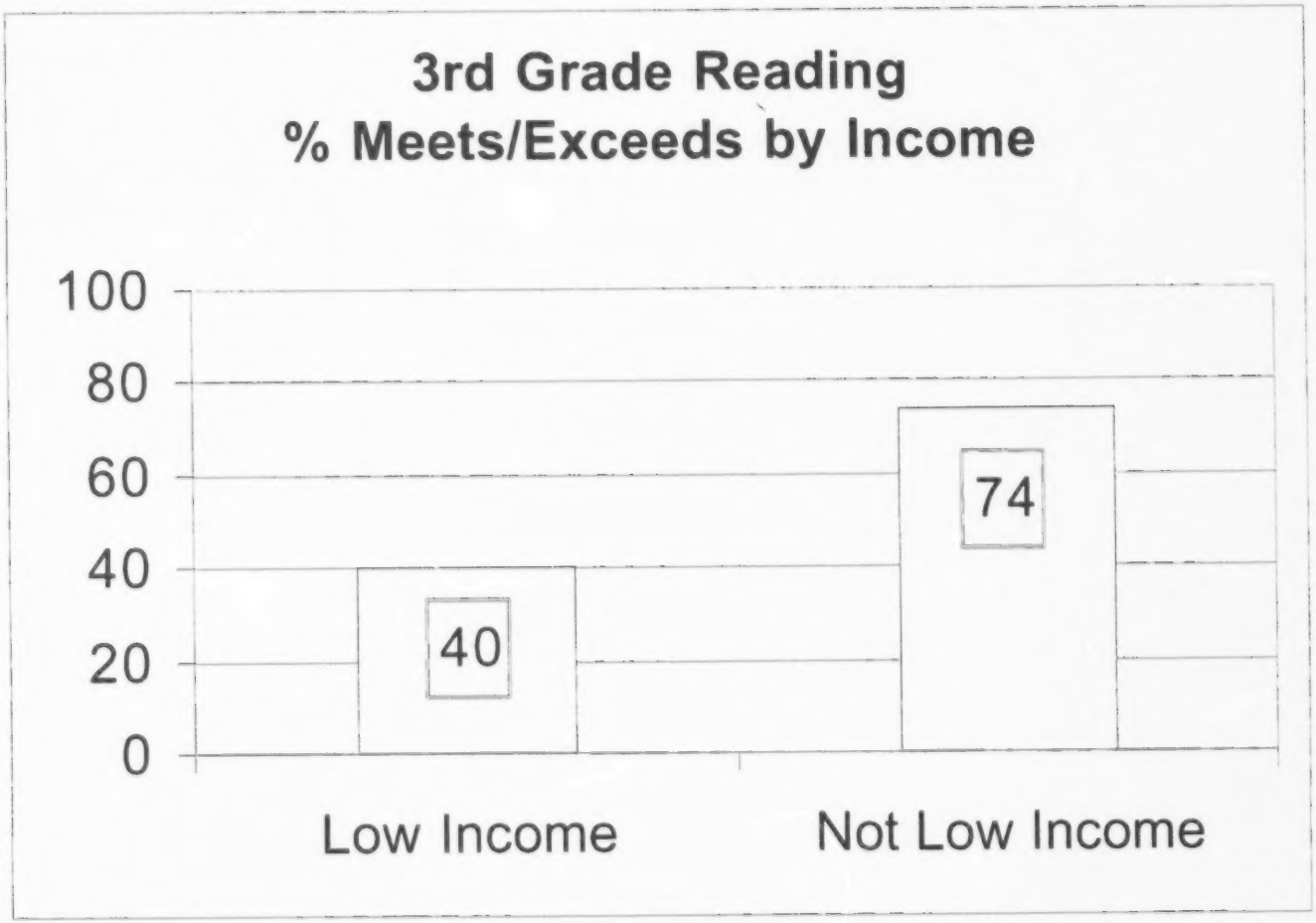
3rd Grade Reading
% Meets/Exceeds by Income
100
80
60
40
20
0
40
74
Low Income
Not Low Income

Figure 1

# Achievement Gap: ISAT Results

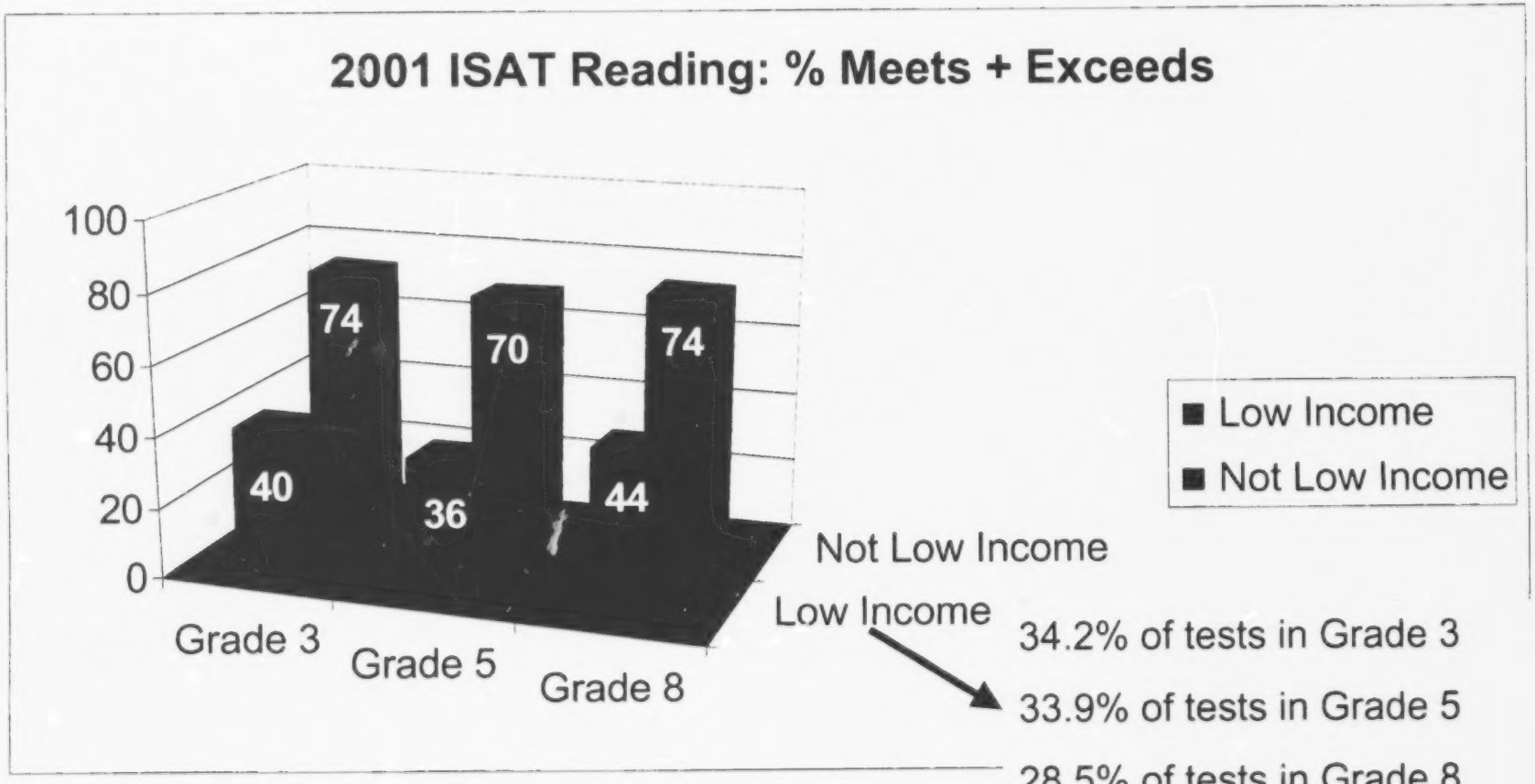


Figure 2

# Achievement Gap: ISAT Results

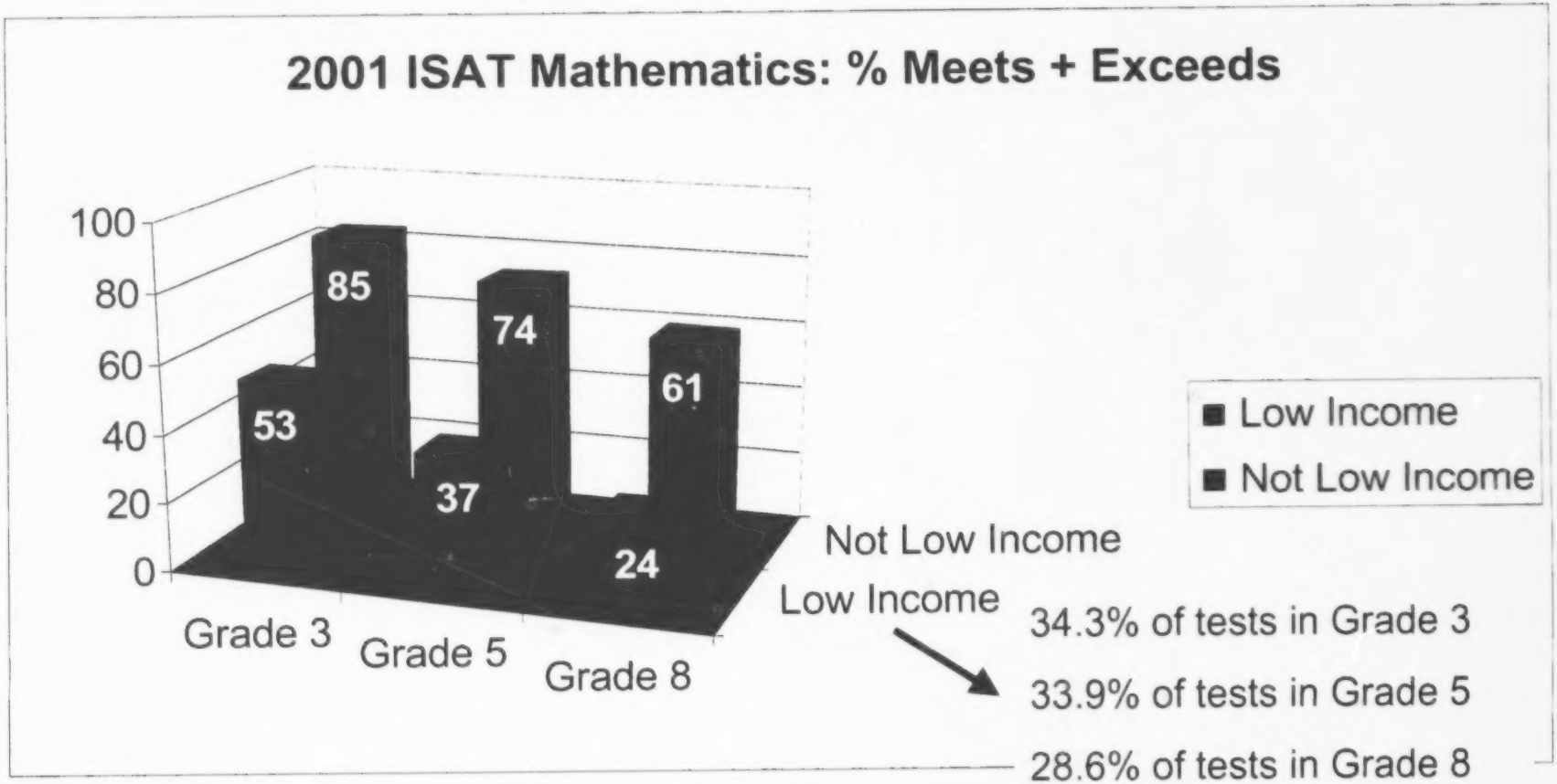


Figure 3

# PSAE MEETS PLUS EXCEEDS PERFORMANCE BY LOW INCOME STATUS

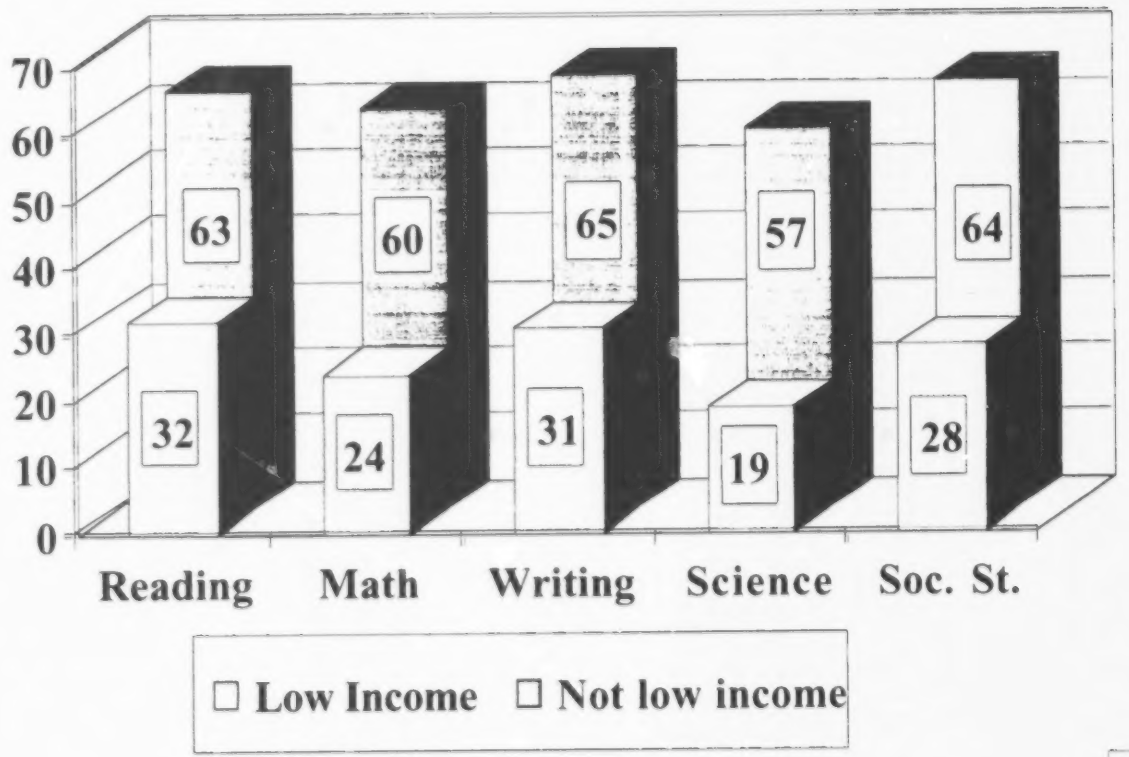


Figure 4

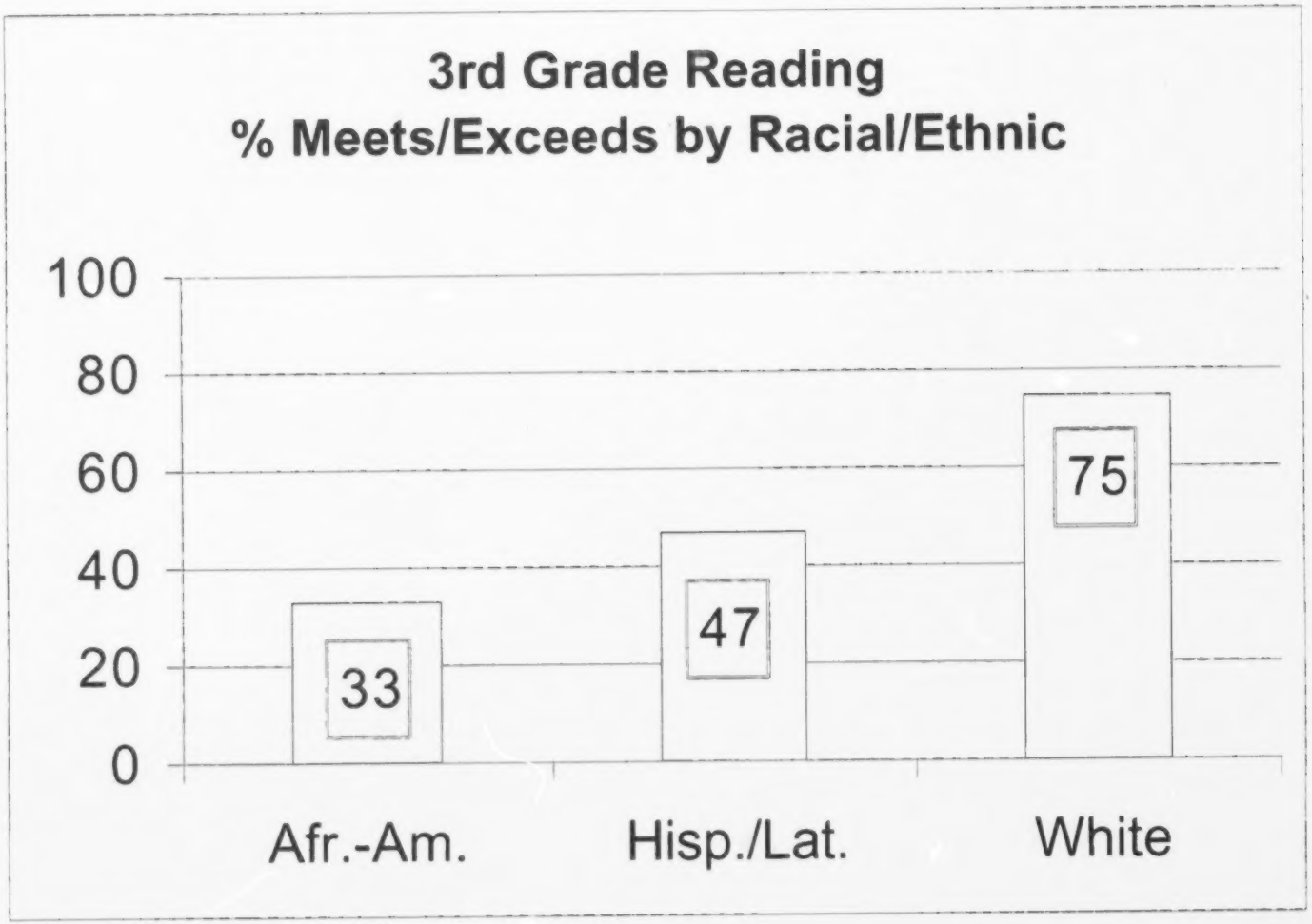
3rd Grade Reading
% Meets/Exceeds by Racial/Ethnic
100
80
60
40
20
0
33
47
75
Afr.-Am.
Hisp./Lat.
White

Figure 5

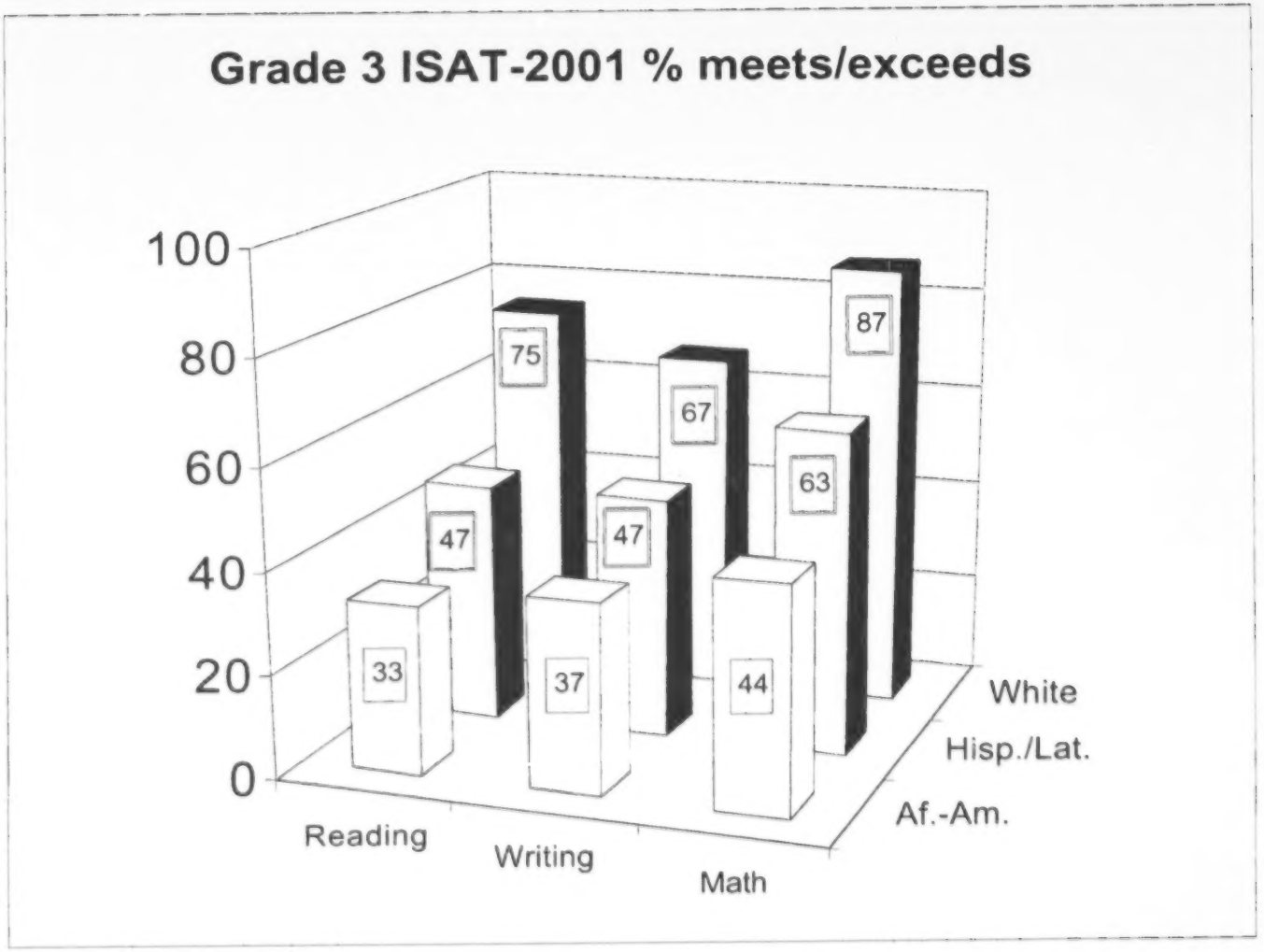
Grade 3 ISAT-2001 % meets/exceeds
100
80
60
40
20
0
75
67
87
47
47
63
33
37
44
Reading
Writing
Math
White
Hisp./Lat.
Af.-Am.

Figure 6

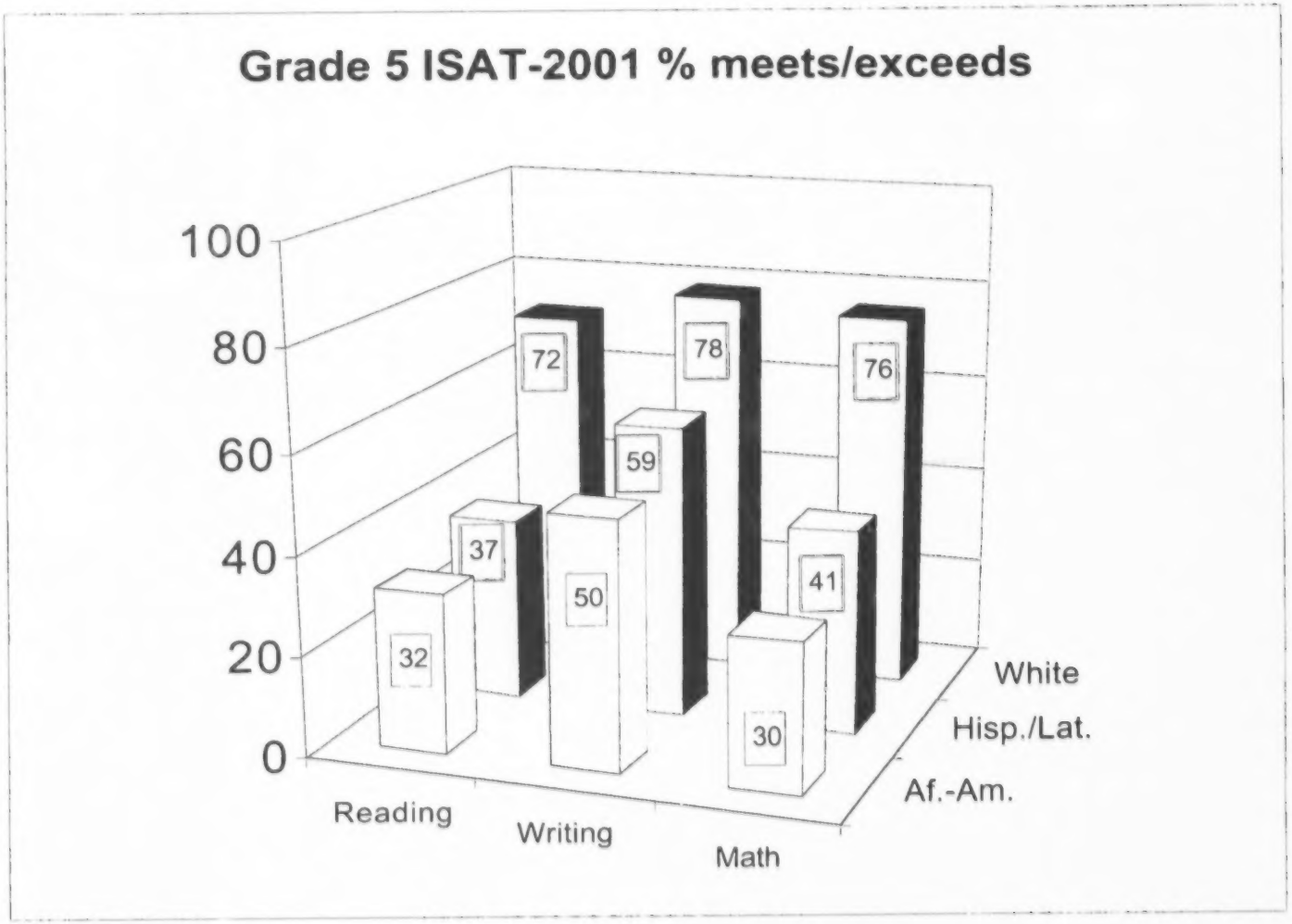
Grade 5 ISAT-2001 % meets/exceeds
100
80
60
40
20
0
72
78
76
59
37
50
41
32
30
White
Hisp./Lat.
Af.-Am.
Reading
Writing
Math

Figure 7

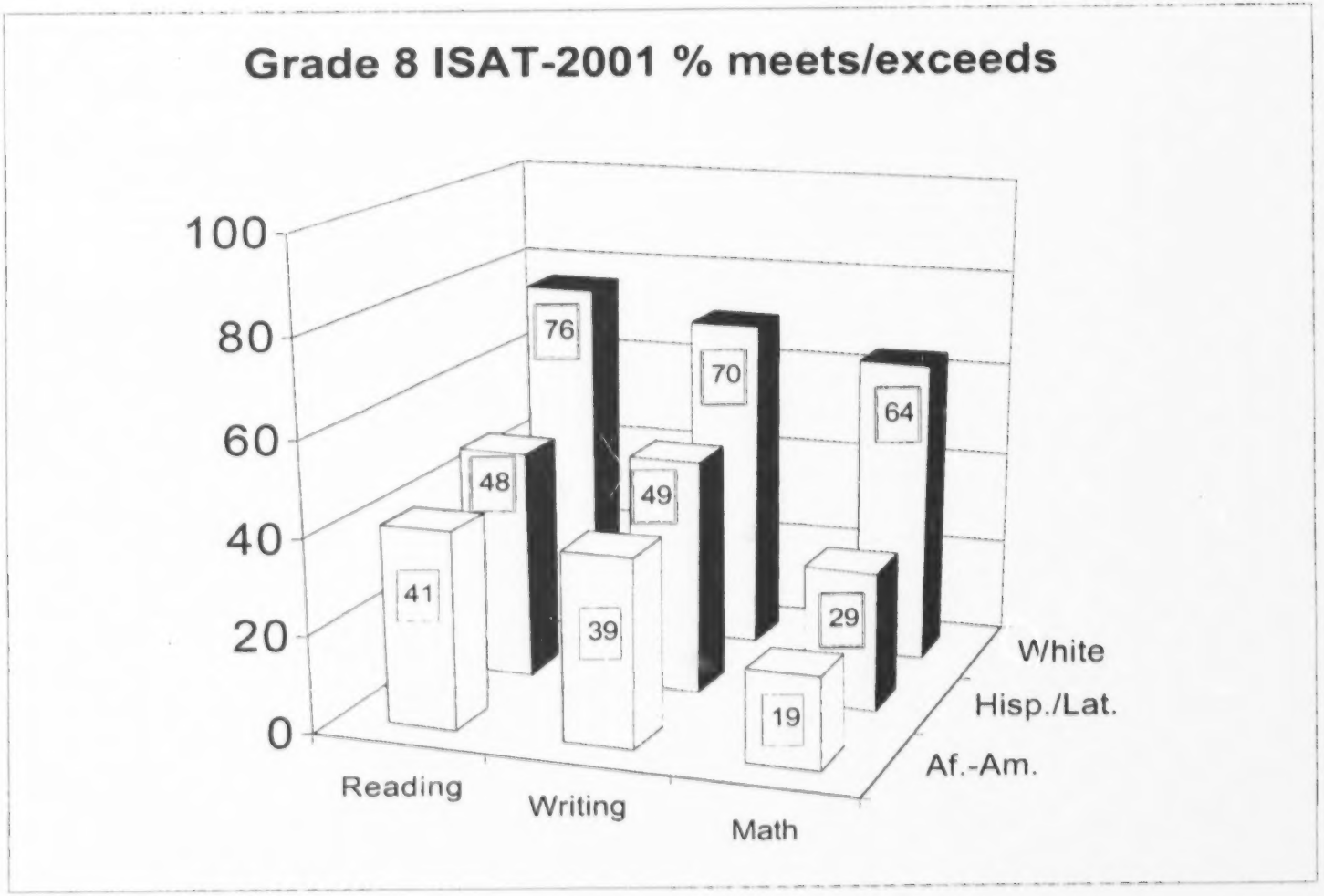
Grade 8 ISAT-2001 % meets/exceeds
100
80
60
40
20
0
76
70
64
48
49
41
39
29
19
Reading
Writing
Math
White
Hisp./Lat.
Af.-Am.

Figure 8

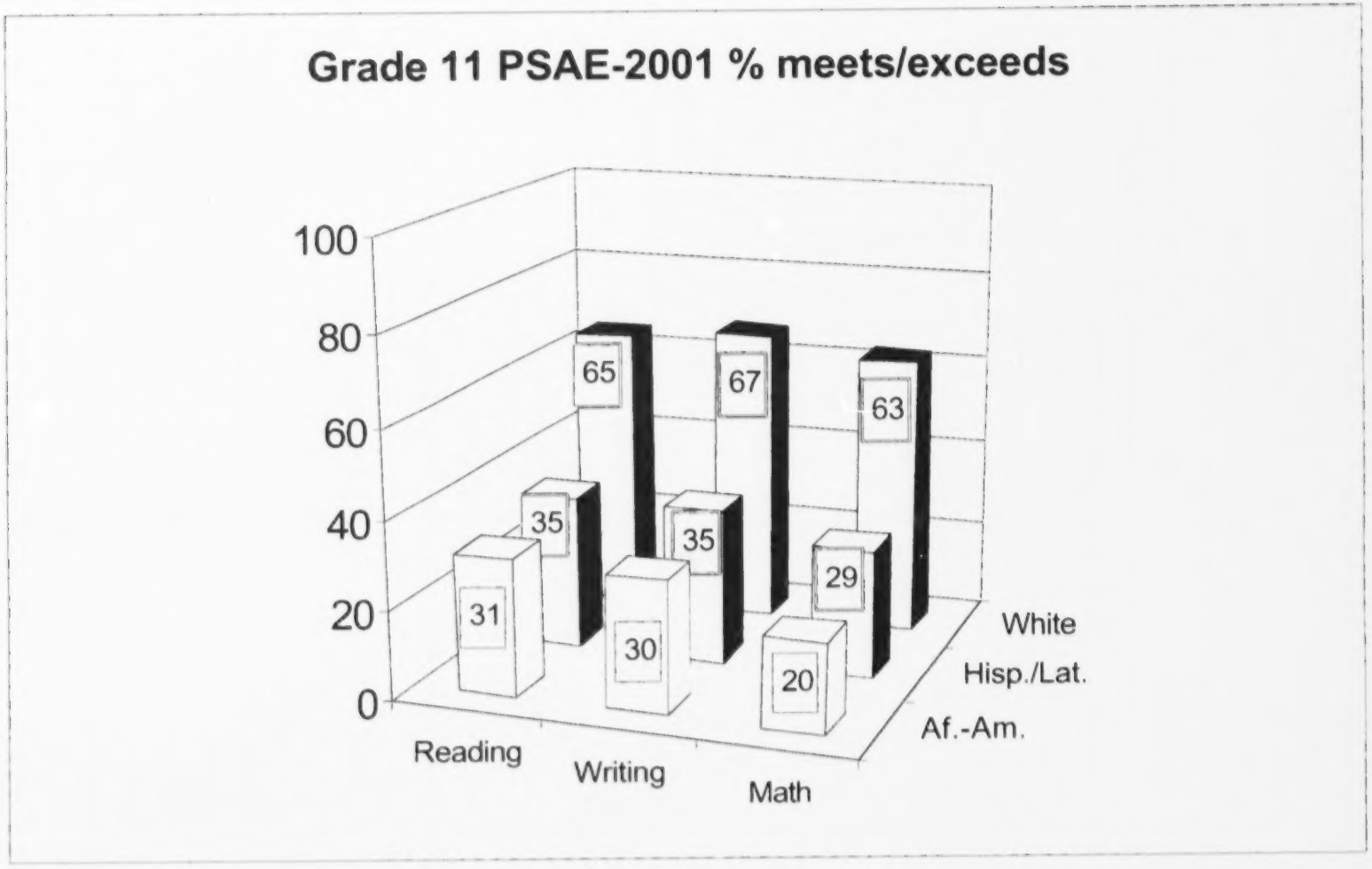
Grade 11 PSAE-2001 % meets/exceeds
100
80
60
40
20
0
65
67
63
35
35
29
31
30
20
White
Hisp./Lat.
Af.-Am.
Reading
Writing
Math

Figure 9

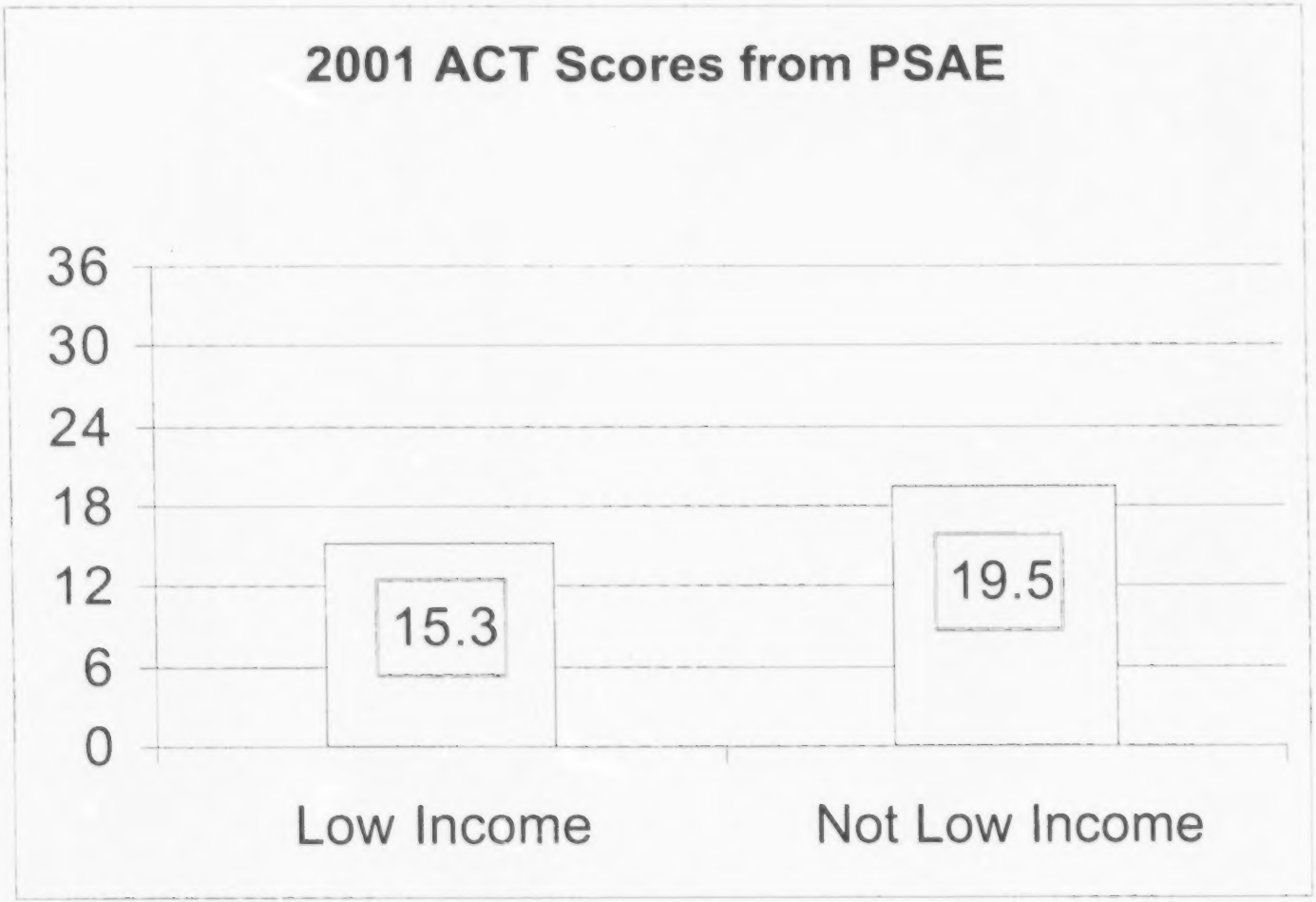
2001 ACT Scores from PSAE
36
30
24
18
12
6
0
15.3
19.5
Low Income
Not Low Income

Figure 10

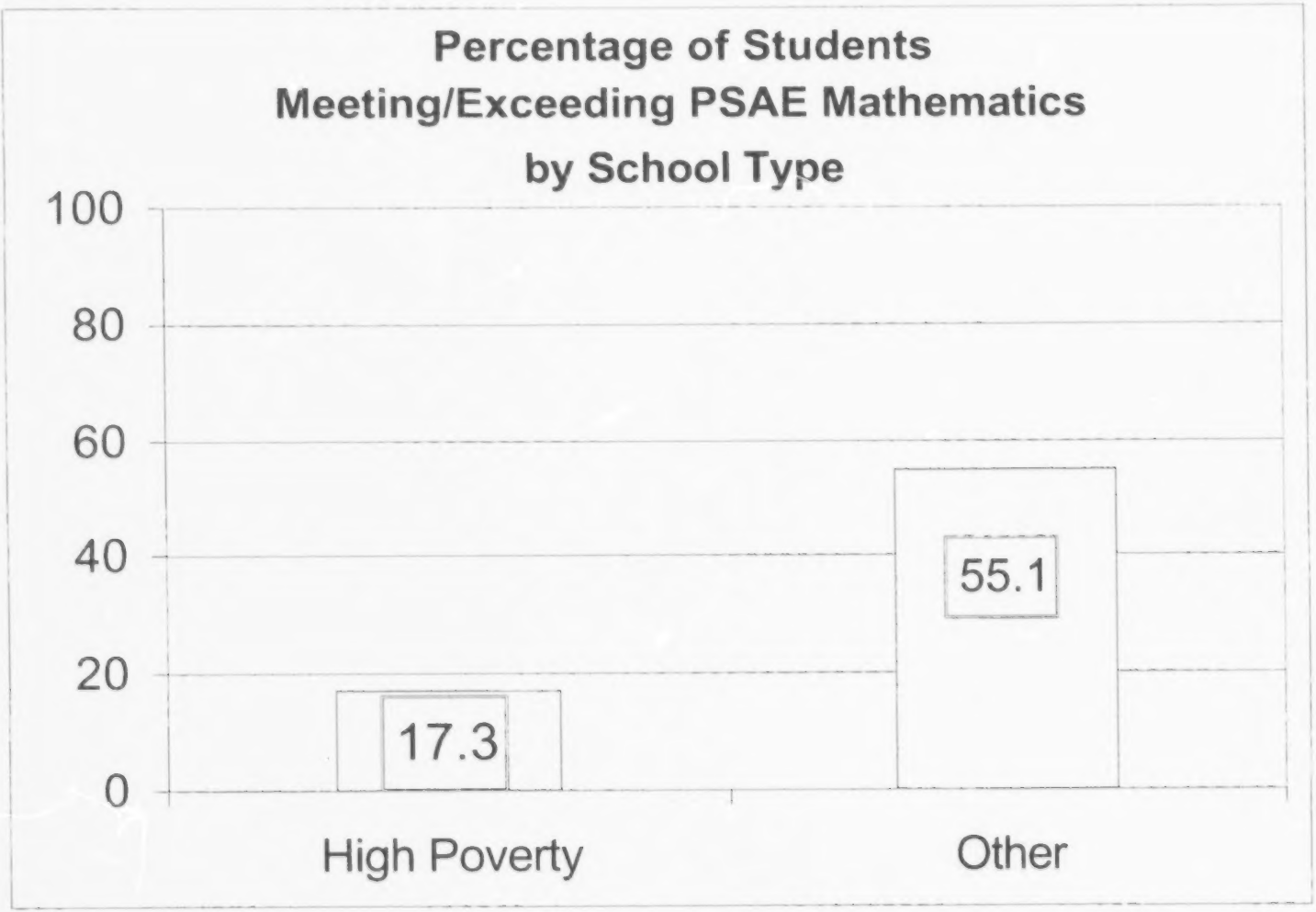
Percentage of Students
Meeting/Exceeding PSAE Mathematics
by School Type
100
80
60
40
20
0
17.3
55.1
High Poverty
Other

Figure 11

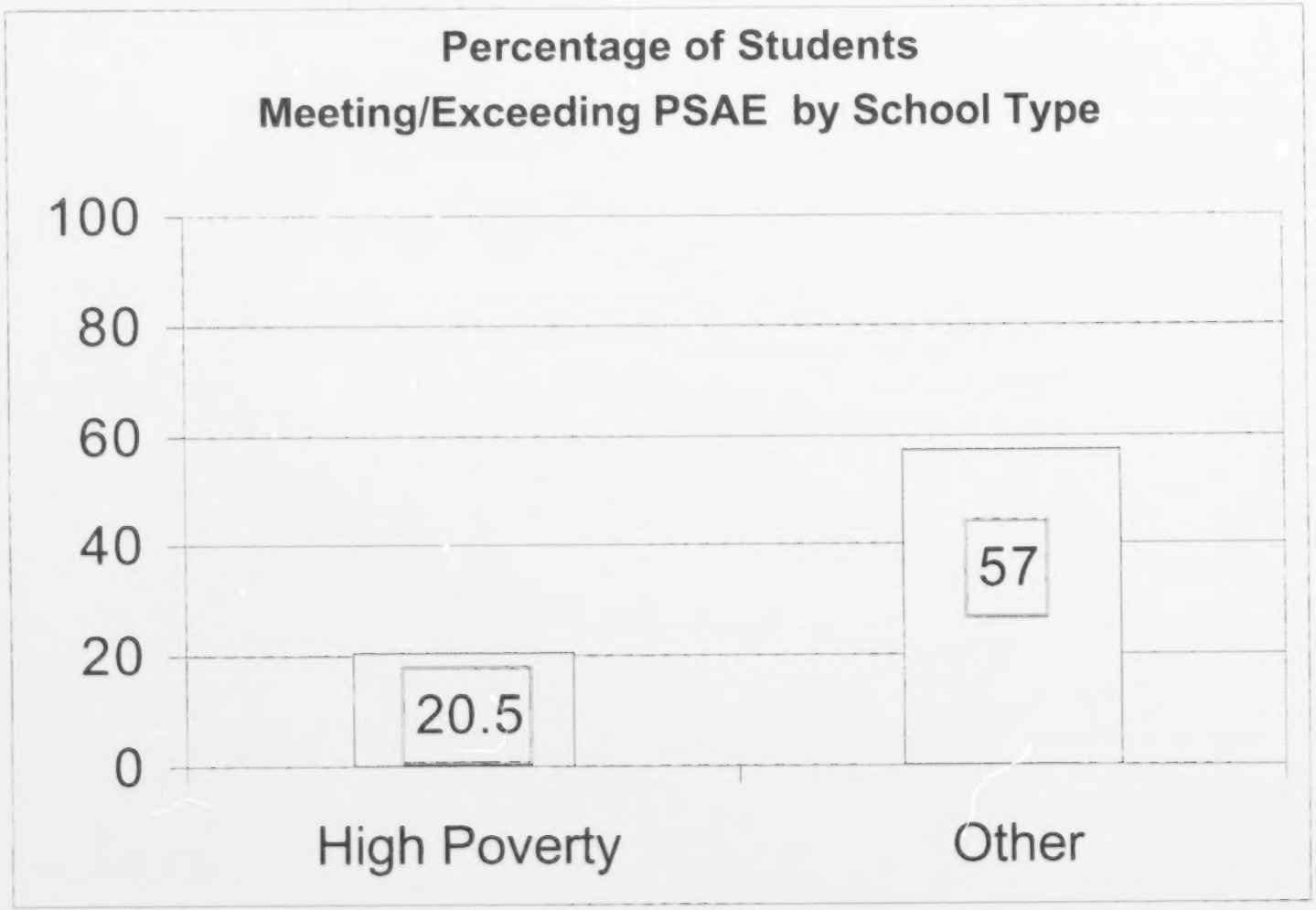
Percentage of Students
Meeting/Exceeding PSAE by School Type
100
80
60
40
20
0
20.5
57
High Poverty
Other

Figure 12

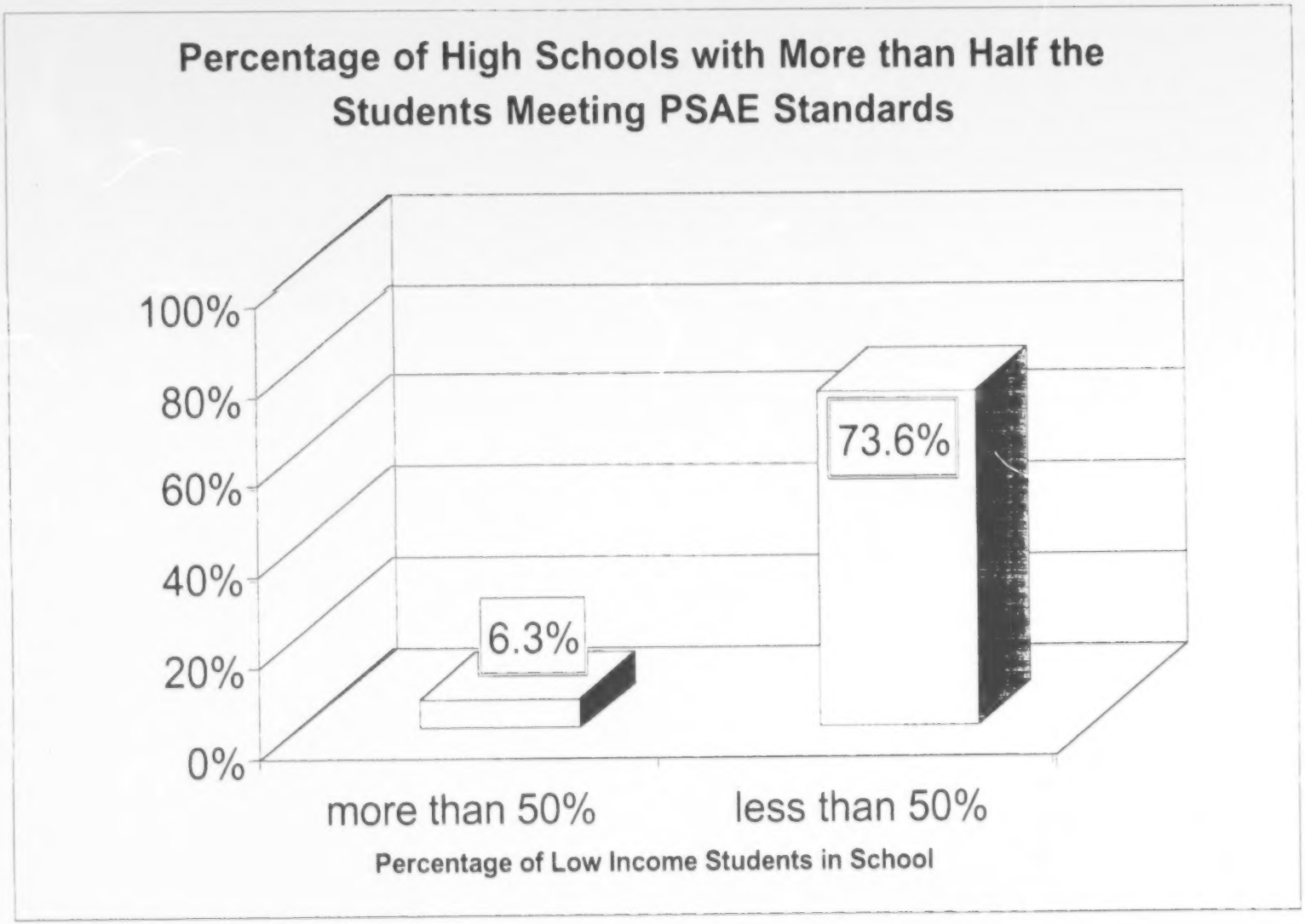
Percentage of High Schools with More than Half the Students Meeting PSAE Standards
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
6.3%
73.6%
more than 50%
less than 50%
Percentage of Low Income Students in School

Figure 13

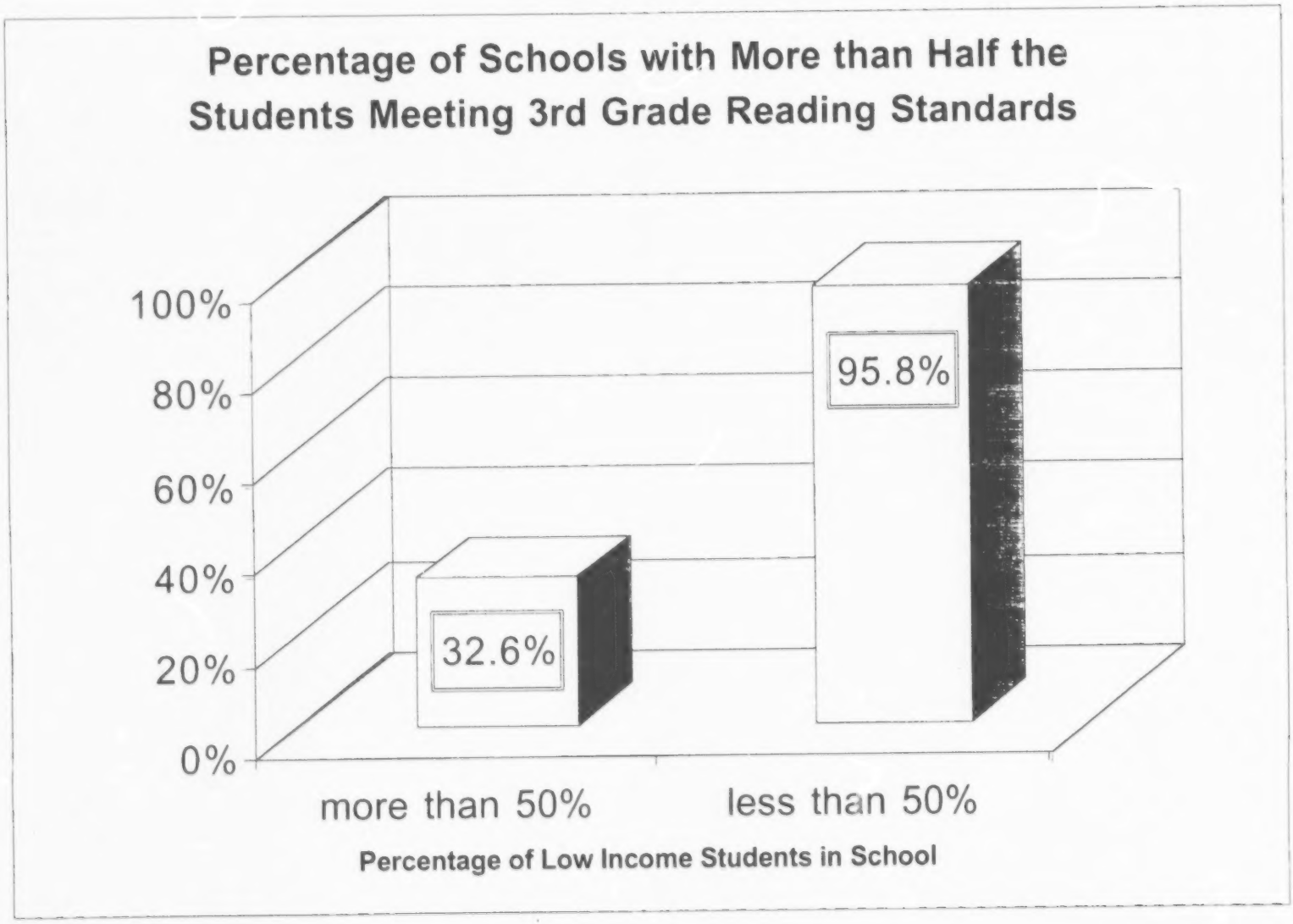
Percentage of Schools with More than Half the Students Meeting 3rd Grade Reading Standards
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
32.6%
95.8%
more than 50%
less than 50%
Percentage of Low Income Students in School

Figure 14

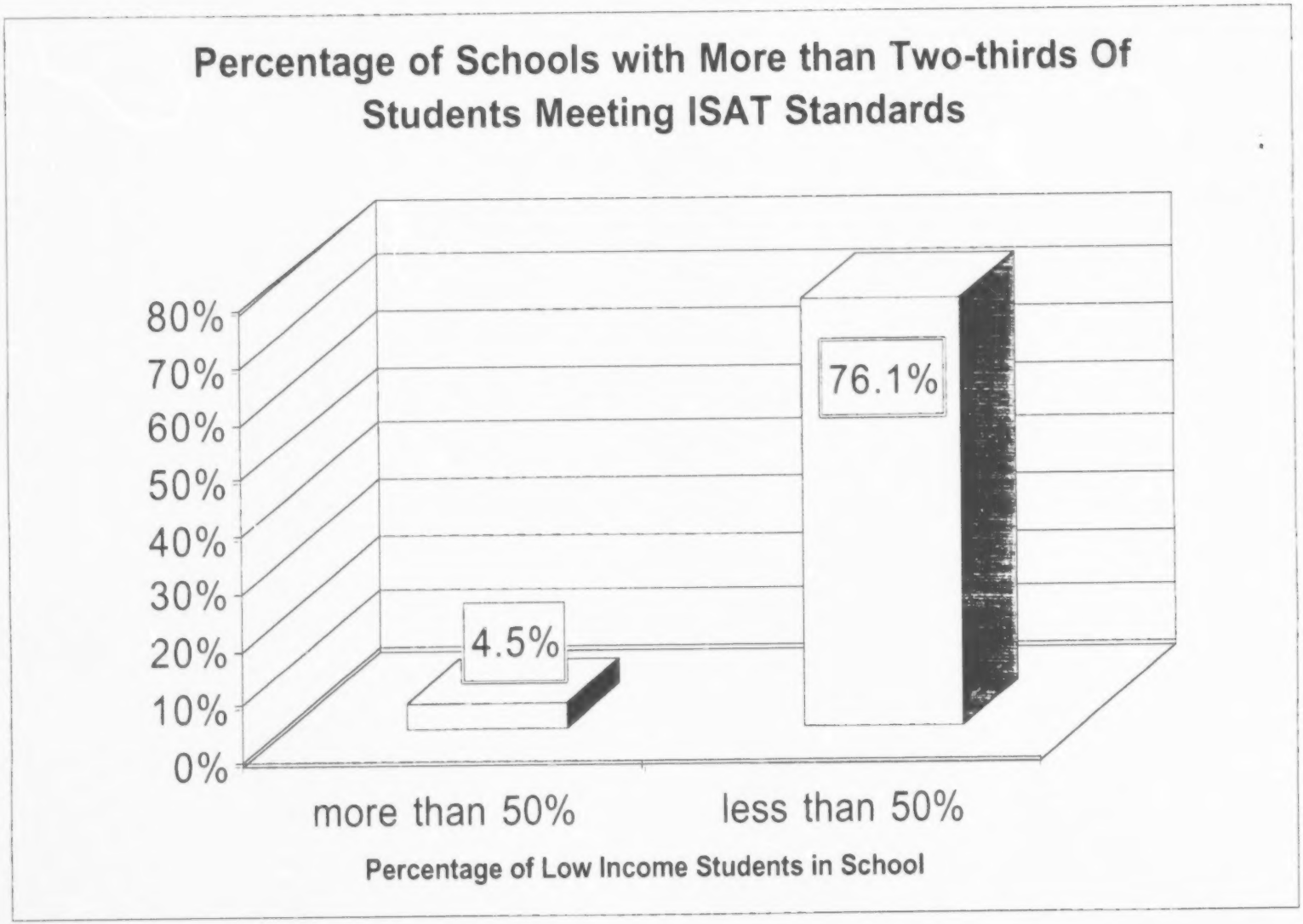
Percentage of Schools with More than Two-thirds Of Students Meeting ISAT Standards
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
4.5%
76.1%
more than 50%
less than 50%
Percentage of Low Income Students in School

Figure 15

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